

*If It's for My Daughter,
I'd Even Defeat
a Demon Lord*

4

CHIROLU

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VISIT...

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"SHE THEN TURNED AROUND AND HAPPENED TO FIND DALE STANDING THERE, HAVING RETURNED FROM AN OUTING. HER HEARTBEAT FELT DEAFENINGLY LOUD. BRINGING BOTH HANDS TO HER CHEEKS, SHE FELT THAT THEY WERE GETTING HOT. RIGHT NOW, EVEN HER EARS WERE PROBABLY RED. FORGETTING TO WALK QUIETLY, LATINA RAN UP INTO THEIR ROOM IN THE ATTIC."

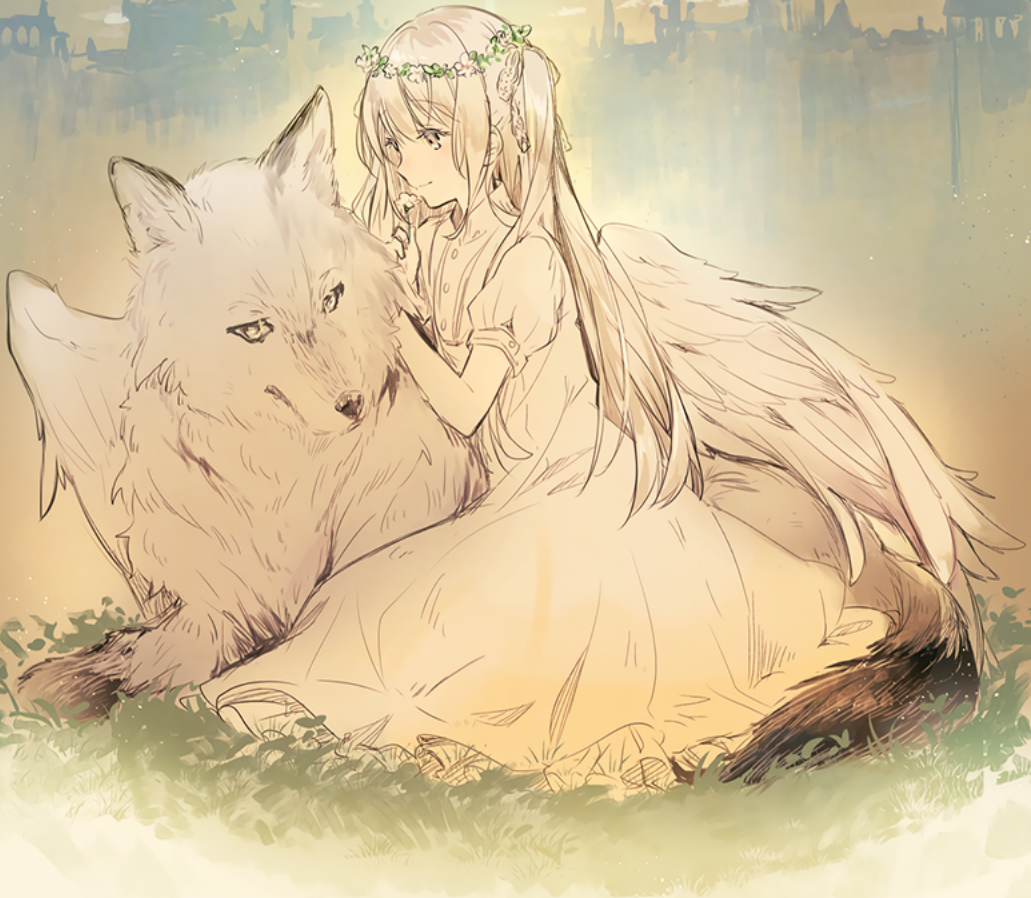


"Huh?"

"I love
you."

LATINA BLINKED HER BIG, WIDE EYES, NOT UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF THOSE SIMPLE WORDS HE'D SO FRANKLY STATED.

THE PAINTING WAS COMPLETED SEVERAL DAYS LATER.
IT SHOWED A WINGED MYTHICAL BEAST PROTECTING A BEAUTIFUL
GIRL ADORNED WITH A CROWN OF FLOWERS, AND SEEMED LIKE IT
HAD BEEN DRAWN AS A PERSONIFICATION OF HER NICKNAME.
THERE WAS A HINT OF WOMANLINESS TO THE FIGURE DISPLAYED
ON THE HIGH-CLASS SILK. THE ELEGANT SMILE ON HER FACE
COULDN'T BE CALLED CHILDISH AT ALL.



1: A Growing Distance from the Platinum-haired Maiden

This was the day after the great disaster of the Ahmar night festival, which had ended in Latina's failed confession.

A gloomy, desperate atmosphere hung over a corner of the Dancing Ocelot. Breakfast was laid out the same as it was every day, but... that girl who always had a smile on her face wasn't there.

Not yet able to read the mood, Theo walked up to Dale and hit him right where it hurt.

"Where's Sis?"

Paying no heed to how Dale jolted up, Theo looked at his mother with a dissatisfied pout. He obviously questioned the matter because from his point of view, the absence of his beloved big sister was abnormal.

"Latina's taking a break for a bit."

"Why?"

"She just is."

"Where's Vi?"

Rita looked around the room. "Now that you mention it, I haven't seen him since yesterday. Did he wander off somewhere to play?"

Vint roamed around aimlessly fairly often, so it was nothing to

be concerned about. He'd probably just gone to burn off his frustration at having been treated harshly by Latina. Though he was still growing, he *was* a mythical beast, so he was unusually astute for an animal. They were confident that he wouldn't go causing trouble without a good reason.

Dale and Latina ate breakfast together. That was the way it had been up until now. They couldn't when Dale was away from Kreuz for work, but aside from that, they *always* did things that way. Yet, when Dale woke up this morning and came downstairs, Latina had already left the Ocelot.

Last night, as he cried himself to sleep, Dale had accepted that it was only natural for a girl Latina's age to distance herself from him. But he hadn't imagined that she wouldn't even be there for their usual breakfast.

"Where's Sis?"

Each time Theo repeated that question, Dale's expression grew more and more dour, but Rita's smile didn't falter in the slightest. Even though he was swamped with extra work thanks to the absence of his assistant, Kenneth realized once more that he shouldn't anger his wife.

At the moment, Latina was in the shop of her childhood friend's family, "the Backstreet Bakery."

"You're seriously helping us out, but is it really alright to be away from the Ocelot?"

"Yeah. Kenneth said since I have the chance, I should learn how to make bread from professionals. You said you were short-handed, Marcel, so I figured I'd come ask... but sorry for coming so early in the morning."

In order to be able to supply fresh bread for every household's varying breakfast hours, this bakery opened quite early. With the

smell of freshly baked bread filling the area, Latina sat amongst the other employees eating breakfast and smiled at her friend's family.

It was still too soon, so Latina didn't have the courage to look Dale in the face. She understood that Dale hadn't even recognized her words as a confession. Even so, having mustered up her courage only to fall flat on her face was too embarrassing, and she hadn't yet put her feelings in order.

Figuring she needed some time, Rita and Kenneth gave her permission to take a break from her work at the Ocelot. With that said, though, if she just holed up in the attic, her thoughts may go in a bad direction, and what's more, if she was in that shop, she'd end up face-to-face with Dale, whether she wanted to or not.

When she'd been wondering just what she should do, Latina recalled her friend's comment. When they met during the night festival, Marcel had said that one of the women who worked at their shop was out on maternity leave, leaving them shorthanded. As a result, Latina visited her friend's house this morning, having nothing to lose. Kenneth made sure to talk to her before she left the Ocelot, and he would also smooth things over with Dale, too.

Childbirth was a serious ordeal for women, but even so, ordinary citizens weren't able to take a long time off from work. There was no welfare program or monetary aid, so you needed to earn your living expenses by working. And so, the Backstreet Bakery couldn't easily hire a new employee to fill the position left by the woman who was on break for her pregnancy. Latina's proposal was truly a welcome one for Marcel's family.

"Well then, it'll just be for a week, but I look forward to working with you." Above all else, Latina's smile, which had been tempered by her long years in the service industry, was brimming with good will and charm.

In the nation of Laband, bread was a staple food.

The Backstreet Bakery handled all sorts of goods, but they were almost all varieties of bread. The shape, type of flour used, and sorts of flavorful seeds sprinkled on top all led to different kinds of breads. The bakery had breads that involved kneading dried fruit or spices into the dough, but they didn't deal with things like pastries.

The sandwiches they'd sold during the night festival the day before were generally only sold during lunchtime. Here in the eastern district, there were a lot of women who worked at shops or as craftsmen. It was a district with a high demand for light meals.

"And then there's the cookies. I think it'll take some time to remember all the prices, so—" Marcel said, explaining the goods sold in the shop.

"Hmm? It's alright. I've come here lots of times, so I already remember them," Latina responded, causing her friend to fall silent for a moment. However, he soon remembered how extraordinary his friend was and went along with it. Being friends with this girl for so long made one come to accept things like that, whether they wanted to or not.

"You'll be fine with the calculations then, too, right Latina?"

"Of course. I handle money at the Ocelot, after all."

They didn't have anything like a register, so math was primarily done mentally. There *were* tools to help, but they were hardly ever used. From Latina's reply, it was clear that she could be used as an immediate asset on the sales front. Because Latina was their son's childhood friend, Marcel's parents also had a good deal of confidence in the girl. That could be seen in the way that they immediately trusted her to handle money.

With each jingle of the bell attached to the door, Latina promptly responded with a bright voice, saying, "Welcome!"

“Oh, my, I’ve never seen you before. Are you a new employee?” An old woman had come into the shop and was surprised to see someone working there that she didn’t recognize.

“I’m just helping out. I look forward to serving you. What can I get for you today?” Latina responded with a bright smile, and the woman smiled back.

“I always just go with this.”

“I see. Thank you for your business.”

Latina placed the bread the woman pointed out into a bag, offered it to her, and took her money.

“Are you about the same age as little Marcel?”

“We went to school together.”

Completely unperturbed by the woman’s prying, Latina kept on smiling back. Marcel broke out in a sweat as he overheard the conversation while he was carrying out freshly baked bread to the storefront. If even a shred of such groundless rumors reached Dale or Rudy, he’d be in real danger.

When it came to staple foods, most people had a usual shop that they stuck to. Occasionally they may try eating at a different shop, but everyone ultimately decided on a favored taste for their everyday meals. Because of that, the majority of the customers who visited this shop were regulars.

Unsurprisingly, after the morning rush passed, the next busy period was around lunchtime. Latina wasn’t able to just sit idly in the meantime, so she hunted around for any little job she could take care of, like cleaning up around the store.

Latina and Marcel often played in the eastern district when they were young, and occasionally some old friends would stop in. However, there were many people who were unacquainted

with Latina. Marcel had expected some, but when Latina was sweeping, there was an unnaturally large increase in male customers coming to the shop for the first time.

During the pauses in her work, Latina looked at the baking bread with great interest. It was still her first day, so she wasn't allowed in the kitchen; but because she'd spent many years assisting Kenneth, she didn't miss even the slightest detail, such as the distance and workflow between Marcel, who was the assistant in this shop, and his father, who took the lead. Latina said that she just wanted to learn the basics of baking and didn't need to be paid. It was a very fitting request for the girl.

Normally, bread-making techniques would be considered a trade secret. It wasn't the sort of thing that you taught to just anyone. Marcel managed to convince his parents to accept her request despite that because they had heard her story back when the two were still in school. In Vassilios, where she came from, they didn't eat bread. Latina had it for the first time when she came to Laband.

Marcel had never even imagined there could be a country without bread, and his friend had grown up in such an entirely foreign nation. Latina had expressed a desire to see how bread was made, and as a boy who'd had bread as a big part of his life ever since he was born, he wanted to show her.

Latina somehow managed to make it through the lunch rush, too. Unsurprisingly, she was no match for a veteran, but she was doing exceptionally well for her first day. After business passed its peak, Latina took a break and filled her cheeks with some bread she received for lunch. Seeing her look so overjoyed, Marcel's parents couldn't help but smile themselves.

The Backstreet Bakery's business day ended before sunset. Even if they stayed open past when most households bought their bread for dinner, there would be no customers, and they'd just be putting themselves at risk of being robbed. And of course, they

also had to open early tomorrow.

Once they'd finished closing up shop, Latina watched as Marcel and his family prepared for the next day. Unable to hold herself back, Latina asked a number of questions while this was going on. She had a particular interest in the yeast that was so essential to baking bread and wanted to know how it was used. It must have felt nice to knead that soft-looking dough, and it was great fun to watch the bread get shaped and lined up in rows. However, Latina knew that wasn't all that it took to make bread. After all, her long years of learning under Kenneth had taught her just how important pre-cooking preparations were.

By nature, Latina liked learning new things, so her mood was on a bit of an upswing on her way back from the Backstreet Bakery. She may not have been able to get hands-on experience, but just being able to watch bread getting made from nearby was enough to greatly satisfy her curiosity. On top of that, she'd been able to interact with different sorts of customers and do a different kind of work than she did in the Ocelot, making for a very fresh experience. She was also promised that she could watch the bread being baked early tomorrow morning. Normally, she'd handle the Ocelot's nighttime business hours alongside Kenneth, but today she figured it would be better to turn in early.

While thinking on such things, Latina made it back to the familiar front of the Dancing Ocelot. Not realizing that the regulars were making strangely unpleasant expressions and awkward smiles upon seeing her, she circled around to the back.

"Kenneth, I'm home!"

"Hey."

"You seem busy. Do you need me to help out after all?"

"No, you're off, so take it easy. You've got to properly take advantage of times like this."

Latina felt terribly guilty seeing Kenneth struggle to handle the kitchen by himself as the shop headed into its peak busy period, but he just smiled back. She had been so very depressed, and Kenneth was relieved to see her come back looking so clear-headed. He got the feeling that it was a little ridiculous that that was her method for refreshing herself, no matter how much she may have loved to work. But cooking was every bit as much a hobby as it was a job for him, so there may not have been much difference between the two of them.

“Do you want to eat dinner out in the front?”

“Where’s Theo? I’m burdening Rita, too... so I should at least help take care of Theo at night.”

“Then I’ll leave that to you. Theo’s at his grandmother’s place. He should be back before much longer.”

Kenneth’s in-laws, Rita’s parents, had entrusted the shop to the young married couple and moved into the residential area of the southern district. They weren’t normally seen around the shop, but when Kenneth and Rita were shorthanded, they’d occasionally show up to watch Theo or help man the Akhdar’s message board. Vint wasn’t around today, so they were taking care of the mischievous little rascal instead. Rita’s mother wouldn’t be able to handle doing this every day, so they only asked her to when it was crucial.

When Theo returned a little while later, he shouted out “Sis!” and ran straight for Latina. His grandmother found the way that her grandson went straight for Latina without even turning around just a little dejecting.

“Theo, have you had a bath?”

“Not yet.”

“Then let’s do that before eating.”

After seeing off Theo's grandmother, Latina held the boy's hand and went into the kitchen.

"I don't wanna wash my hair!"

"That won't do. I'll wash it for you, so you just need to behave yourself."

Even as he said that, Theo clung tightly to Latina. He hadn't gotten any attention from his precious big sister since morning, so he was seemingly trying to get in a full day's worth now.

Looking over at the two of them in his spare moments during his work, Kenneth unwittingly broke out in an awkward smile. He honestly felt like his son may have been a bit too attached to his "big sister." But even so, he figured it was a good thing for the boy to have someone like Latina to pamper him when Kenneth and Rita needed to be strict with him.

Still, the very air itself felt like it had grown more relaxed from Latina's return alone. That effect she had on others seemed to be a sort of rare, difficult to achieve virtue.

Latina grabbed a change of clothes for Theo and then headed to the bath in the rear of the shop. Unsurprisingly, Theo followed close behind her all the while like a puppy.

Theo hated getting soap in his eyes, so he never wanted to wash his hair, and when Kenneth told him to do so he'd throw a massive fit. When it came to Rita, Theo would often be found getting harshly scolded with tears in his eyes. Latina, however, was able to get him to behave himself and let her wash him, and she handled the boy quite skillfully and made things quite a bit easier on his parents.

"Sis!"

"Theo, you took your clothes off all by yourself. Good job!"

“Hehehe!”

Their conversation, which Kenneth could hear from the rear of the shop, made Latina and Theo sound even more affectionate than real siblings, and Kenneth broke out in a smile.

After the bath, Latina took Theo to the storefront of the Ocelot, where she spotted Rita hurriedly working away past the faces of the familiar customers.

“Rita, I’m home. Sorry for taking time off.”

“Welcome back, Latina. Don’t worry about it. I need to keep myself moving anyway.”

Rita wasn’t quite as graceful as Latina when it came to serving customers. That could be seen clearly from the way that she’d slap down mugs with a loud *clunk*. When it came to waiting on customers, that was the norm for bars like this, and nobody minded.

“Theo, can you be a good boy and have a seat?”

“I’m a good boy!”

After Theo sat down with a self-satisfied look in his chair, Latina headed into the kitchen. After serving up the food Kenneth had prepared while they were in the bath, she once more headed back into the shop.

Seeing Latina take care of Theo, Sylvester broke out in a somewhat awkward smile, like he was concerned about something.

“You’re really good at taking care of the kid, little lady.”

“Really?”

Not aware of the awkward look on Sylvester’s face, Latina simply smiled back. All the while, she nonchalantly lent Theo a hand

as he ate.

“Yeah... Little lady, y’see...” Sylvester had trouble finding what to say.

“Um, Mr. Syl...” Latina interrupted, now looking troubled.

“Please hold on. I need a bit longer... I still can’t just yet.”

“R-Right...”

Despite the uncomfortable atmosphere, Latina gave a giggle and a smile.

Sylvester had heard the details of the catastrophe that had unfolded in this shop the night prior. He hadn’t been there in person, but the main topic of discussion in the shop today was Dale’s dismay and unease, and the absence of a certain adorable waitress.

Having watched over the girl since she was little, Sylvester had long since realized that she had feelings for her guardian. When it came to Dale, Sylvester had no problem teasing him to his heart’s content, but he took great care when dealing with this young girl. He was afraid of stepping on a landmine and ending up being hated.

“I’ll probably be able to get things back to normal... so I just want a bit of time to get my thoughts back in order.”

“Little lady...” Sylvester gave a sigh and then changed gears. He purposefully switched over to a brighter expression and voice. “If you need help, then I’ll lend you a hand. Even an old guy like me has a few tricks up his sleeve.”

“Right. Thanks, Mr. Syl!” Latina’s smile as she responded seemed to display her earnest feelings, which relieved Sylvester.

Not long after finishing dinner, Latina brought Theo to his

parents' room and lulled him to sleep. Once she confirmed that he was peacefully slumbering, she quietly exited the room. She shut the door without making a sound so she wouldn't wake him up.

She then turned around and happened to find Dale standing there, having returned from an outing. Immediately seeing that he didn't have on his usual equipment for such excursions, Latina figured that he didn't go out to the forest today.

She suddenly turned around. It was clear that she was even less mentally prepared than she thought. She wasn't even able to look Dale in the eye. Her heartbeat felt deafeningly loud. Bringing both hands to her cheeks, she felt that they were getting hot. Right now, even her ears were probably red.

Forgetting to walk quietly, Latina ran up into their room in the attic.

In response, Dale thought, *She... She won't even look at my face...! This damn rebellious phase...!*

Latina didn't even realize that Dale had dropped his head, crestfallen and powerless, and let his emotions flow forth as tears.

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Latina headed for the Backstreet Bakery early in the morning again the next day.

After the morning peak passed, there was time for a breather.

"Huh? What's wrong, Rudy?"

"I should be asking *you* that, Latina. What're you doing at Marcel's place?"

Latina gave a troubled smile in response to Rudolph's words.

Seeing her expression caused Rudolph to remember the catastrophe of that night, and he awkwardly averted his gaze. He then rather unnaturally stated his reason for being here.

“Y-You see, my superiors sent me here. They told me to go buy something for a snack.”

He had been ordered by his superiors in the guards on an errand to this shop in particular. It was already well known amongst the regulars of the Dancing Ocelot that their favorite adorable waitress was working as a temporary employee of a bakery. They didn’t head there themselves because they had an unspoken rule to not bother her.

Thanks to the fundamental hierarchy of the guards, it wasn’t possible to interrupt a superior when they were giving an order, nor could one ask for further clarification. That was the kind of work environment Rudolph had.

“I’m still not used to working here, so it’ll take a bit. You’ll need a lot of sandwiches, too.”

“That’s true,” Rudolph responded while Latina started preparing the bread. She pulled out a number of pieces of bread and then slid a knife into one from the side. She skillfully smeared on some butter mixed with mustard, showing off the results of all her experience with food since she was young.

“Are there any ingredients I should avoid?”

“You don’t have to worry about every little thing like that. It’s fine.”

“I see.”

After laying down a heaping helping of colorful vegetables, she layered slices of smoked meat on top. In the blink of an eye, she’d completed a delicious-looking sandwich. Seeing that it was a big

order, Marcel's mother had come out to help and started wrapping up the completed sandwich in thin paper. When Latina saw that Marcel's mother was taking care of it, she returned to making the sandwiches once again.

In a short time, the order was done. Looking at the mountain of completed sandwiches, Latina couldn't help but tilt her head.

"Rudy... are you going to carry these all back by yourself?"

"Ugh..."

"Do you need a hand?"

"I-I can handle this much. And you're helping man the store right now, so you can't just leave your post so easily."

"That's true. Take care, Rudy."

Latina opened the door for Rudolph and saw him off, as he had both hands full carrying the masses of bagged sandwiches. She watched in concern for a while as he headed off towards the guard station, but since she couldn't do anything more to help, she headed back into the shop.

Rudolph, who had been offered help from Latina but refused her, ended up finding his afternoon training unusually rigorous. Thanks to the special treat of handmade sandwiches from their favorite adorable waitress, the old men in the guards' upper ranks got huge boosts of energy. If Latina had helped Rudolph carry the sandwiches to the guard station, they would have had a chance to show off outside of their usual drunken state, so Rudolph's afternoon training ended up being especially harsh.

One way or another, though, things would have ended up bad for him.

After finishing up her work at the Backstreet Bakery, Latina visited Chloe's house. On the night of the festival, she had worn a

new dress that her friend had made, and she'd left the clothes she'd been wearing at Chloe's house. She'd borrowed makeup tools and the like, too. Even though Latina knew she needed to take them back, she was a little reluctant to do so.

As if to support that premonition, when Chloe greeted Latina and heard about what had happened after they parted ways, the girl let out a large sigh and drooped her shoulders. And then, a chop descended upon Latina's head.

"Ow!"

"You're so smart, but you really can be dense in some strange ways, Latina."

"B-But...!"

"No 'buts'!"

Chloe let loose another chop. She wasn't moved at all by the way her friend's grey eyes watered up in response to the blow.

"Why did you have to say it that way?" Chloe was so astonished because Latina had told her how she'd worded the confession that had led her "guardian" to say she had entered her rebellious phase. What she ended up saying had lacked too many key words to get her point across.

"But..." Latina looked down sadly in response. Even so, she didn't hold her tongue. Through the *pitter-patter* of her teardrops, Latina told Chloe everything that had happened.



“I always tell him that I love him... So I thought I should try to phrase it differently...”

That was why she'd told Dale that she didn't think of him as a replacement for her father. To her, he was a precious man she loved. She had been trying to tell him that it wasn't the sort of affection one had for a father.

“I never thought he'd question if I even cared for him at all...!”

Dale had reacted like his child had rejected his very existence. Latina had thought that her telling him how much she loved him constantly was obvious evidence to the contrary, but Dale had ended up questioning that. His reaction had been just too great of a shock and had left Latina at a loss for words, awash in pure confusion.

“I should have told him he was misunderstanding and that I loved him... But my mind went blank, and I had no idea what to say...”

Depressed, she looked down at the floor the same way she often did when she felt like this.

“So... why have you been sulking ever since?”

“Wah...”

In response to Chloe's unrelenting questioning, Latina slowly looked back up, her eyes filled with tears.

“Even I don't understand myself right now...”

“Huh?”

“I decided to confess my feelings... I wanted to have a different sort of relationship with Dale... That should've been how I really felt, but...!” She was holding her voice in check, and it certainly

wasn't loud, but it felt like Latina was screaming out the feelings in her heart to her friend. "When Dale didn't recognize that I'd confessed to him, I felt really relieved...!"

"Latina...?"

"I was relieved... that things could stay the same... I wanted to do what you told me, but... I realized that even more than that, I wanted things with Dale to stay the same way that they had been..."

To Latina, being held in Dale's arms made her feel more relieved than anything else in the world.

She'd felt that way ever since he'd saved her and hugged her tight when she had given up on everything, even her very life. When she was lonely and when things were painful, the warmth of his arms helped support her. When she felt like her heart would break and when her tears wouldn't stop flowing, he'd tell her everything was okay in a gentle voice and hold her tight.

And Dale would likely continue to protect her with great care. He'd hug her with those arms and gently stroke her head with the warm palm of his hand. As long as she remained his "cute daughter."

Even if Dale fell in love, got married, and started a family, he wouldn't abandon her. She knew better than anyone that he was deeply kind and caring.

But if she wasn't his "cute daughter" anymore...

Dale had never seen her as a member of the opposite sex to begin with. After all, he still saw her as a young, tiny girl. On top of that, she may not have even been someone Dale saw as a potential target for romantic affection.

Unlike his "work acquaintance" she had once met, she wasn't

mature or composed, nor did she have the sort of physique that fascinated men. She had wanted to become the sort of woman Dale could love, and she'd tried her hardest to do so, but to be honest, she didn't really know what sort of woman she should become to start with.

At the very least, she'd be better off if she were at least a human, like he was. Just by being the same race as him, the other women around him must have seemed far more wonderful than she was. Latina couldn't help but tally up all the things she lacked.

Confessing to Dale may do nothing but trouble him. And... if their relationship became more awkward as a result...

She'd lose the one place she could be at ease... The one place she could return to.

To Latina, that thought was absolutely terrifying.

It was true that Dale not realizing she had confessed was so embarrassing that it left her feeling depressed and not wanting to see his face. But at the same time, she also couldn't deny that she felt truly relieved.

"And so... I wanted a little more time. To distance myself from Dale a bit until I could say I was sorry, and that everything could go back to the way it was, and until I could smile again..."

Latina honestly felt that now that her feelings and her desire to change their relationship hadn't gotten across, she wanted to bury them deep in her heart and let things stay the same.

The feelings Sylvia had pointed out were the result of all sorts of contradicting emotions tangling together. Latina was no longer able to do anything about the unrest and disturbance in her own heart.

“I just want... a little more time...”

She at least wanted enough time to get her heart in order and figure out just what she wanted to do.

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Five days had passed since Latina started going to the Backstreet Bakery. It could also be said that it had been five days of Dale barely being able to talk to Latina.

During that time, Dale had considered going to look in on the Backstreet Bakery several times, but he hadn't actually done so. If he got caught, he felt like Latina might end up hating him for real. That thought frightened him more than the idea of facing any massive monster.

Latina's very presence helped soothe Dale. Seeing her smile, hearing her voice, and spending time close enough to feel her warmth... Such happy moments gave him the energy he needed to get through the day. Having suddenly lost all that, he'd grown haggard. He hadn't withered away physically, but he'd lost all of his vigor and looked like an invalid as he sat in a corner of the Dancing Ocelot and gathered dust.

“Latina... I've got a Latina deficiency...”

As his good friend would put it, this was Dale at his worst.

This was a truly deplorable fact, in a way, but when Dale was like this, his combat skills and judgment weren't dulled in the least on the field of battle. It was precisely because he was able to cut himself off from his emotions and remain composed that he had come to be called first-rate at such a young age.

However, that was a story from the battlefield, so now, the young man burning out for all to see looked like nothing but a hopeless good-for-nothing.

“Rita... How long does it take for a girl’s rebellious phase to pass...?”

“You wouldn’t exactly call something that only lasts a few days a ‘rebellious phase.’”

“Dying... I’m dying... Ugh... Just how much penance must fathers the world over endure...?”

“You’ll be fine. She told you she doesn’t think of you as her father, right?”

“Waaaaaaaaah!”

Not realizing the meaning behind Rita’s biting words, Dale let out that pathetic shout and then collapsed on the table. His reaction only made the irritation behind Rita’s smile grow as she continued dealing with paperwork. Surely there was a limit to how dense someone could be. Rita was well aware of just how much Latina had been hurt by this man’s thick-headedness. Seeing Latina bravely try to share her feelings, Rita, as a fellow woman, couldn’t help but feel irritated at Dale.

“Kenneth...”

“What is it?”

“Is that *thing* alright?”

Looking over towards Dale, at whom Sylvester was pointing, Kenneth let out a big sigh. “Apparently, he intends to take a wait-and-see approach until Latina calms down.”

“The little lady, huh...” Sylvester wore a serious expression and folded his arms. “She’s a smart kid, so... I get the feeling she may end up admitting defeat...”

“Yeah...”

Dale wasn't the only one who had watched Latina grow and come to feel affection for her. Sylvester was near the top of that list.

"I'm worried that the little lady'll decide to act like nothing happened and go back to just trying to be a 'good girl.'"

Kenneth had also watched over Latina, so he truly understood what Sylvester was saying. He'd also realized that ever since she was little, Latina had always been just too good of a kid. She was a clever child.

Not only was Latina naturally reasonable and a good listener, she also seemed to have always kept her situation in mind, even back when she was very young. Because of that, the adults around her worried that her actions were because she thought she *needed* to be a good girl.

That's just the kind of girl Latina was.

Now that even such a clear display of affection hadn't gotten through to Dale, Kenneth and Sylvester couldn't help but feel that Latina would jam all of that back down inside and act like everything was back to normal. She was skilled and clever, so as painful as it was, she'd surely be able to pull it off.

"The little lady really is a good kid... so I at least want her to have a chance to clearly settle things."

"Right..."

The two men wanted Latina to have a proper answer, even if it was rejection. She was still maturing; the experience would help her grow. If Latina kept on like this, hiding her feelings deep inside, it wouldn't be good for her.

Nobody was concerned with the man slowly becoming a member of the living dead over in the corner. When it came to picking

sides between a full-grown man or a girl entering puberty, the one who would get Kenneth's and Sylvester's support was a natural choice.

As they thought about the girl's mental state, the two men folded their arms again and gave a sigh.

That night, Kenneth called out to Dale. The young adventurer couldn't help but worry about Latina and when she would return, but he pathetically lacked the courage to directly deal with the matter. He made for a horribly pitiful sight.

"Dale... How long do you plan on staying like that?" Kenneth asked listlessly as he watched Dale listen attentively with a bitter expression on his face for the sound of footsteps on the stairs in the kitchen.

"Until... Latina's rebellious phase... is over, I guess...?"

"You mean it's up to Latina?"

Dale looked deeply troubled by Kenneth's question.

"I mean, I've only got a little brother... I really don't know how to deal with a girl at a sensitive time like this..."

Seeing that his "little bro" seemed to be serious, Kenneth heaved a sigh. At this rate, it felt like things would turn out just as Sylvester had feared. There was no way that such a clever girl would fail to realize that Dale was in this state, and she'd hide her own feelings and smile, just like he wanted. That was the sort of girl she was. In that case, if Kenneth waited until Latina was mentally ready, it may be too late.

But even if Latina did have lingering feelings of hesitation, choosing to leave things as they were wasn't inherently an unfortunate decision. If she did so, she'd end up swallowing down her painful feelings, but she'd be able to remain in that happiness,

like a warm, sunny spot. And from then on, the two would be able to keep enjoying that calm, gentle contentment. That was one of the options open to her.

If that was the case, then what Kenneth was trying to do may have just been meddling, and it could lead to little but his own self-satisfaction. While thinking that, Kenneth poured an amber liquor into two glasses filled with ice, then placed them in front of his “little bro” and himself.

When Kenneth plunked the glass down in front of him, Dale stared back at him questioningly. “Kenneth?”

“Pretty much all of the customers have left, and my job is done for the day,” responded the other man, and he brought his glass to his lips and took a sip. “Dale, hurry up and figure it out already.”

“Figure what out...?”

“Latina told you she didn’t think of you as a ‘father.’ She didn’t say that because she’s hit puberty.”

“Kenneth... what are you...?”

“Latina may have considered you a guardian this entire time, but not a replacement for her father.”

Dale still looked befuddled even after Kenneth said all that, leaving Kenneth completely astounded with his “little bro’s” troublesome personality.

“Do you really not get it?”

“Like I said, what are you talking about?”

“For a long time now, Latina has seen you as a ‘man.’”

“...Huh?” Dale squeaked out in a strange voice, looking like

even more of a blockhead. He stopped and thought on what Kenneth meant for a while, then broke out in an awkward smile. “Wh-What are you saying, Kenneth? That’s not poss—”

“How can you say it’s not possible?”

“I mean, Latina’s my cute little daughter... We’re not blood-related, but still...”

“Latina’s not as much of a child as you think. Devils may have long lifespans, but still, that girl’s almost an adult.”

“I know that. That’s why I’m always so worried—”

Seeing that Dale really hadn’t realized, Kenneth brought his glass to his mouth again and then interrupted. “You may say that, but you’ve been treating Latina like a kid all this time.”

Not allowing Dale time to deny it, Kenneth thrust the problem with Dale that he’d realized long ago right in his face. “That’s because you want Latina to stay a child.”

At first, Dale looked shocked, but the next instant he was awkwardly smiling again. “What are you saying...? Why would I...?”

“If you recognize Latina as an adult, then you’ll have to let her go... right?”

Dale froze in shock. Even if he knew that what Kenneth was saying was the truth, he was avoiding thinking about it and instinctively rejecting it. But even so, that didn’t mean that he’d realized his own problem just yet.

“You don’t want to lose the way things have been with Latina, right? Even from my point of view, I can clearly tell how much you’ve changed since she came. It’s no surprise that you feel that way.”

“Th-That’s right! What’s wrong with wanting to stay together

with my cute little Latina...?!”

“When that girl becomes an adult... all sorts of guys will pop up wanting to marry her. Even if you were to count her being a devil against her, with her personality and looks, she’s absolutely a catch.”

“That’s true, too...! That’s why I’ve gotta keep an eye on her, to make sure no vermin get too close...!”

“What do you plan on doing if someone shows up that Latina wants to marry?”

Dale’s expression grew clearly strained in response; even so, he squeezed out words fitting of a “guardian” in a low voice. “I’d want to tear him to shreds, but... if he was who Latina wanted, I’d let her marry him.”

As long as she was happy. Her happiness was all he’d ever wanted.

“That’s what I figured you’d say,” Kenneth said, looking like he’d expected that, and then continued on, “If you acknowledged that she’s an adult, you’d have to face that matter head-on. That’s the first reason you don’t want to accept it.”

“The first reason’...? You mean there are more...?”

“Have you thought about why Rita’s so angry with you?”

“There’s no way I could figure that out...”

“Latina has always confided in Rita. There are things that a girl like her can’t ask you or me.”

For example, the changes involved in growing up, and everything that came along with it. There were all sorts of questions that were hard to ask men and that they wouldn’t have even been able to answer, anyway. Rita was the closest grown woman to

Latina, so that was who she turned to.

To Latina, Rita was a different sort of confidant than Kenneth. Rita had been right there at Latina's side as she'd grown up. She'd realized that ever since Latina was little, the young girl had had feelings for her own guardian. Rita had seen the young girl's innocent and pure affection, as well as her painful, heartrending feelings. Rita had been by her side the whole time, watching as she'd matured.

"Rita says that what she finds the most unforgivable is how dense you are when it comes to Latina's feelings."

"Like I said... there's a chance that you and Rita could just be imagining things..."

"It took me a while to figure it out too, but I'm certain that Latina has felt that way about you for some time now."

"Wha...?!"

"I figured it out for sure around when the two of you returned from your trip. According to Rita, she'd already been that way for a while."

Dale was clearly shaken and astonished; it seemed he truly hadn't realized how Latina felt.

Kenneth may not have been Rita, but he couldn't help but call Dale dense. All of the regulars in the shop were also aware of who Latina had feelings for. She tended to wear her heart on her sleeve—in more ways than one. It was far less of a secret than she herself imagined.

"Latina hasn't been hiding her feelings for you. In her expressions, and her voice, and each and every action... Everything that girl points your way makes it perfectly clear how she feels. And yet you don't realize it, which is what makes Rita angry."

“Even if you say that, I...”

“You didn’t ‘realize’ for the same reason I mentioned before. You refuse to think of Latina as anything but a little kid. That’s how you’ve been looking at her.”

Dale saw Latina as his “adorable daughter.” Even as she was becoming an adult, he still saw her through a “cute little Latina filter.” Latina’s affections were clear to everyone else around her, but they were blocked by that filter and never entered Dale’s field of view. Out of the people who knew how Latina felt, Rita wasn’t the only one who wanted to tell him off.

The people around her had seen Latina’s pained expressions as Dale failed to realize her feelings, which she then buried inside and bravely forced a smile. It was only obvious that Rita would want to scream, “Why don’t you see it?!”

“Now that I’ve said all this, even *you* aren’t stupid enough to say that Latina’s just in a rebellious phase, right?”

“But... but... I...” Dale’s gaze darted about as he muttered, before finally wringing out something meaningful to say. “But to me, she’s my ‘cute little Latina’... I just can’t think of her that way, so...”

That was certainly a fair enough reason. Latina was a young girl who was still growing. But Kenneth kept going, not willing to accept that as a complete answer.

“It’ll be difficult to say that in a few more years, right? Do you think you’ll still be able to say that then?”

“That’s... I won’t know until that time comes.”

Kenneth refused to let Dale run away, because his “little bro” still hadn’t yet realized the biggest problem with himself.

“Why are you so desperate to avoid accepting Latina’s feelings?”

“L-Like I said... Latina’s still...”

“If either you or Latina marry someone, then you two won’t be able to keep living the way you are now. But if you marry Latina, you can keep on going like you have been, right?”

Having watched them from so close, Kenneth didn’t see any space for someone else to enter Dale’s and Latina’s lives. They were dear to each other, supporting each other mentally and sharing in their happiness. Not only that, Dale was also relying on Latina far more than he likely realized in his day-to-day life. Kenneth had watched the young girl gallantly struggle to help out, taking care of all the housework as well as figuring out Dale’s tastes and preparing meals accordingly.

Compatibility between two people is something that can only be seen after they get together. It was no surprise that Dale argued this and that right now. But when it came to looking for a spouse, it would be hard to find someone as great as Latina. Other women would likely hate to even be compared. If Dale let her go, he would need to hunt for someone who may not even exist.

Kenneth knew above all else that his “little bro” wanted to be with the girl. Even if Dale didn’t realize that, his actions made it clear.

“I’m not saying you have to do it now. You could wait a few more years. So why aren’t you even willing to consider the possibility?”

If Dale wanted their current lifestyle and the happiness they shared to continue, that option was open to him. Even Kenneth didn’t think they should form that sort of relationship immediately, but he did think it was at least important to consider the

possibility.

“Anyway... that’s your problem. I’ve more or less guessed at why you haven’t tried to get yourself a girl, and I think that Latina has long since been prepared for what you’re thinking.”

Kenneth thought of Dale as a serious and kind person, and he had watched over him since he was a boy, so he was more or less aware of how Dale really was, too. Dale may have liked having stupid conversations with his fellow men, but it wasn’t as if he was unpopular with the ladies. There were even times when there were hints of him growing closer to a woman. It would honestly be stranger if a healthy man doing such hot-blooded work didn’t have such desires. And yet, Dale hadn’t tried to form a special relationship—the kind of relationship that could come between him and Latina—even for an instant.

For an earnest, serious person like Dale, it was unnatural. But from what Kenneth could tell, it was precisely *because* Dale was so earnest that he chose to maintain that sort of a distance.

“It’s because... for a long time now, you’ve tried to prepare things so that everything would be alright no matter when you die...”

As Dale sat in silence, his face looked like that of a toddler forced to swallow something bitter.

“That’s why... when you decided to have Latina stay by your side, I was relieved. You’d gained a reason to cling to life: you wouldn’t want to die and leave her behind.”

“I...”

By their nature, those called adventurers lived side by side with danger, and many of them chose to simply live in the moment. They never knew what tomorrow may bring. It was never certain that they’d live to see another day, so they reveled in the

joys of life when they were able, not worrying about what they left behind.

Dale was a little different, though. He was diligent and serious and so solemn that the “adults” who had grown close to him couldn’t help but find it worrying. They weren’t just concerned about Latina; Kenneth and Sylvester saw Dale as someone to worry about, too. They’d known Latina since she was young, but the same was also true of Dale.

Dale had only been able to find things to die for. He’d been that way ever since he took on the responsibility of being contracted by the nation of Laband to eliminate the threat of the demon lords. He knew that the demons who served under the demon lords and the devils who followed them had their own reasons for doing what they did. He was unable to ignore the fact that they had friends and family, too.

If he had to kill them, he wouldn’t regret doing it. They had their own reasons that they couldn’t yield, so he would accept that they tried to end his life, and he wouldn’t hate or hold a grudge. That didn’t mean he’d let himself be killed so easily, but he had accepted that he *would* be killed someday. And so, Dale—

“So from the very start, you’ve counted yourself out as a possible partner for Latina.”

Dale opened his mouth to deny Kenneth’s claim, but he was left at a loss for words.

“What you want is for Latina to be happy. And you think that since you’ll die first, you can’t give her that.”

That was the biggest problem with Dale. He was so earnest and kind that he didn’t form a special relationship with anyone because he didn’t know when he might die. If he passed away first, he would make the other person suffer, so he chose to keep his distance to begin with.

And that's what he did with Latina, too. If someone showed up who could make her happy, and protect her after he died... If there was someone else he could entrust her to, then his role as a guardian would be over. Regardless, he didn't want to let her go, to lose her. That's why he wanted the two of them to keep being a guardian and his little child for just a little while longer.

“W-Wait... Hold on... I...!”

“Latina's long since prepared herself.”

“Wha...?!”

“She's accepted that she's a devil... It won't just be you. Me, and Rita... and even Theo... We'll all get old and die before her, and she's prepared for that.”

Even so, she—

She said she was happy—

She said the time they spent together now was precious—

She was always, always smiling—

Kenneth was speechless as he watched Dale chug the contents of his glass down in a single go; it most certainly wasn't a weak drink. As the glass *clonked* down onto the table, only ice remained inside.

“Dale... you...”

Dale had likely done it out of embarrassment. If asked, he would blame it on the alcohol, but the blush running over his face was likely due to all the facts he'd been forced to confront.

After watching his “little bro” stand up so fast that he almost knocked his chair over and then practically fled to his room, Kenneth stared into the glass in his hand.



Seeing that it was almost empty, he figured maybe he had also drunk too much, and while swaying the glass, he quietly muttered, “So he finally realized it, huh?”

With this, things would change at least a little, right?

Those two were close to start with. It surely wouldn't be a bad thing for Dale to understand how Latina felt and face his own true feelings in turn. Dale's unconscious actions made his feelings all too obvious, so Kenneth couldn't help but want to speak up, even if he knew he was being meddlesome.

I think you could stand to live for your own sake at least a little more...

With that thought, Kenneth gulped down the remaining contents of his glass.

Then, the next morning...

When he went downstairs to start his morning preparations like he always did, Kenneth was left dumbfounded. Someone was sneaking around the kitchen suspiciously, as if they were plotting to skip town.

“What are you doing...?”

“K-Kenneth?! Why are you...?!”

Dale was clad in traveling clothes, and as he turned around in surprise, he looked just like a brat caught plotting a prank. From his reaction, it seemed clear that he really was planning on running away. Latina was on break, so Kenneth needed to wake up and get started earlier than usual to compensate for that; as a result, he also ended up coming downstairs earlier than usual.

Apparently, Dale had been aiming to leave while Kenneth was still asleep and without saying anything to anyone.

“I-It’s for work, you see! I should be getting a request any minute! I just figured I’d head out first myself this time!” As Dale hurriedly spat out his excuse, he looked exceptionally desperate.

“No, you see, you...” Kenneth, utterly stunned, started to warn the other man against doing something so foolish. However, Dale looked at him, almost in tears, as if begging him to not say anything more.

Kenneth suddenly realized something. His “little bro” should have built up a fair amount of life experience, but he’d avoided being in a relationship. In other words, he was lacking in that field. He was more naïve than Kenneth had thought.

“I-I made sure to leave Latina a note! Take care of the rest, alright?!” Dale shouted, then opened the door and sprinted out full-force. He was moving so quickly that it was hard to imagine he was the same man who had been turning into the living dead just the other day.

Dale had run away. Taken flight. In a way, he’d done the same thing Latina had. The two really were strangely similar. After fleeing, Dale also planned to throw himself into his work, just as she’d done.

But it’d be bad for you to do that, right...?

By the time Kenneth had that thought, the person it was meant for was already nowhere to be seen.

2: The Platinum-haired Maiden and Her Red-headed Childhood Friend's Love

Before long, Kenneth's back grew damp with an unpleasant sweat.

He should have run full-sprint and caught Dale. He'd made such a poor choice at such a crucial moment; his skills must have declined more than he'd thought in the long period of time since he'd been an active adventurer. Perhaps he needed to retrain himself.

As Kenneth thought such things, Latina stood before him.

"Why...? He's... never left so suddenly before... I didn't even get... to say 'Take Care'..." Latina muttered in a daze, her face ghastly pale and her eyes full of tears as she looked up at Kenneth.

Latina had woken up, come downstairs, and found Dale's letter on the kitchen table, and her expression had quickly turned to one of shock. After sitting the trembling girl down in a chair, Kenneth figured it would be best not to push breakfast on her, so he just left a hot cup of tea in front of her instead.

"Dale has his reasons. He was called out suddenly... right? He asked me to keep an eye on you," said Kenneth, taking care not to make things worse and figuring that Dale had likely already mentioned in his letter that he had headed to the capital for work.

"Why didn't he tell me himself...?"

There was no way Dale could have told her the real reason. If

he had told Latina that it was because he had found out how she felt, it would have just complicated things unnecessarily.

Kenneth couldn't think of anything proper to say and started to sweat even more.

"Is it because I distanced myself from Dale? Because I was selfish? Because I wasn't able to be a 'good girl'...?" Latina asked with a quivering voice. She was blaming herself. It was painful to watch.

Kenneth knew that no matter how much he denied that, his words wouldn't reach her. Ever since Latina was little, Kenneth knew full well that his words weren't enough to truly move her. For the time being, he couldn't help but mentally curse Dale for having chosen the worst possible action to take. There just simply weren't any words to cover things up in this situation.

"I'm going... to Marcel's place. I promised to help out through today..." Latina was so pale that she looked like she was going to collapse, but she silently stood up. After Kenneth saw Latina off as she staggered on her way, he held his head in his hands and wondered just how he'd tell his wife what Dale had done.

Even though Latina was clearly out of sorts, she didn't let that affect her work. She served the customers of the Backstreet Bakery as she wore the same smile as always. Even so, having known her for so long, Marcel immediately realized that Latina was in a bad state.

When her hands stopped moving for a second, she'd breathe a sigh. Then with blurry eyes, she'd grit her teeth and put her feelings behind her.

Lately, she had grown skilled at hiding her feelings of sadness and loneliness when Dale was away, but it was rare to see her feeling *this* down. Just as Marcel was at a loss and wondering what to do, his childhood friend who was now a regular (likely

only for a limited time) came into the shop.

“What’s wrong, Latina?”

Rudolph had also realized with a single glance that Latina was out of sorts.

“I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong... Do you just want the usual?”

“Of course you’re not alright. Your face is totally pale.”

“It’s nothing!” Latina was taken aback at the way that she’d suddenly raised her voice. She tried to gloss over it and smiled, switching back to a gentle tone. “Sorry, Rudy... It really is nothing. I’m alright.”

However, that was awkward and painful for Rudy, who had been her friend for years, to watch.

Ah, she’s holding down the fort again, huh? thought Rudolph, guessing at what was behind her current mood. She normally enjoyed each and every day with everything she had, but now she was shutting herself off from those around her.

Ever since they were kids, it was readily apparent what was going on when she became like that. Even if Chloe half-dragged her outside by force, Latina’s mind seemed to be somewhere else, and she’d just stare straight at the ground. Unable to stand it any longer, Rudy would end up messing with her more than usual, which made such times good memories for him now.

He got the feeling that he’d be accused of teasing her when nothing was going on, too, but he figured there was no helping that. After all, when Rudy made Latina’s big grey eyes tear up just a little, she’d look at him. She was plenty cute when she puffed up her reddened cheeks a bit and complained at him, too. He wanted her to look at him and not their other friends, even if it was only at times like that. Ever since they were young, he’d had a genuine

desire to keep her all to himself.

Even now, as Latina was swiftly assembling sandwiches, Rudy couldn't help but wonder what sort of face she'd make if he suddenly pinched her cheek. To start with, she'd definitely be angry. But if it caused her to forget her current depression for even a moment, then maybe it would be worth it. While thinking such things, Rudolph waited silently for the sandwiches he ordered to be completed.

That evening, Latina had just finished her work at the Backstreet Bakery and said her thanks for everything Marcel's family had done for her during the short time she'd spent there.

"Rudy?" she asked in surprise after she stepped out. Her childhood friend was waiting outside, wearing casual clothes instead of his guard uniform.

"Hmm?"

"What is it? If you need Marcel, he's inside."

"I was waiting for you, Latina."

"Me?"

"I'll walk you home."

"Huh?" Latina tilted her head. "Why? I know the way back."

"I'm not worried about you getting lost." Rudolph looked astounded, but if he'd lose heart over this much, he would never have been able to be childhood friends with the natural airhead. If he wasn't willing to be pushy, he'd never get anywhere. "Your face really is pale. It'd be a big problem if you collapsed on the way there. There are still a lot of outsiders hanging around from the night festival."

When Rudolph had gone to the guard station to deliver the

sandwiches he'd been sent to purchase, some idle chatter with his superiors led to them finding out about how Latina was faring. Rudolph knew very, veeeeery well that his superiors were amongst the regulars who doted on Latina at the Ocelot. Furthermore, as a result of them hearing that her guardian's absence was the cause of her mood, Rudy had somehow ended up getting dispatched to make sure no insolent men were able to take advantage of Latina while she was out of sorts. He had no reason to refuse, and he couldn't anyway since it was an order, so Rudolph had headed towards the Backstreet Bakery once more.

"Do I really look that bad?"

"Normally, you've got a much more easy-going look on your face."

"Easy...?"

"You're always spacing out with a grin on your face, right?"

"Rudy, I thought you'd grown up a bit, but you're still such a meanie..."

Latina puffed up her cheeks, and thanks to her roused emotions, she seemed to regain a bit of her vigor. Not letting his relief show on his face, Rudolph kept on running his mouth.

"It's only natural that I'd feel like hiding what I'm really like around you, Latina."

Even Rudolph was careful when dealing with his superiors. If he talked casually with them and said something careless, he'd suffer a terrible fate. He'd face hazing under the name of "guidance."

His training was so hellish that he nearly died several times, but the guards' headquarters was close to the temple of Niili, and there were guardsmen who could handle healing magic, too.

There was a proper system in place to drag him back up out of hell. He was thrust down to the depths countless times, only to be forcefully brought back to life. That training that made one wonder if they were *literally* in hell created guards with tough bodies and, more importantly, minds.

“Is your guard work tough?”

“I only just became a proper guardsman, so I have my hands full just remembering everything. My training’s been intense since back when I was in the reserve corps, so... I guess I’m used to it.”

“You’re really working hard, Rudy.”

“You are, too,” Rudy said.

“I am?” Latina asked, looking confused.

“Yeah.”

Latina’s expression softened a little. It made her happy when somebody recognized and praised her effort, no matter who.

“Thank you, Rudy,” Latina said with a bit of a smile, not realizing that Rudolph was repeatedly reaching out to hold her hand, only to give up, pull back, and then repeat the process.

And that’s how the pair headed back towards the Dancing Ocelot, where they found Vint, who hadn’t been seen for a while, waiting in front of the entrance. He had been dozing away, but when he sensed Latina’s presence, he headed over, his tail wagging all the while. When he saw Rudolph, however, he stopped in his tracks.

Latina tilted her head at Vint’s reaction. Meanwhile, Rudolph was on guard thanks to the strange air of intimidation the beast before his eyes was giving off.

After thinking for a while on whether or not to attack, Vint decided to ignore the unfamiliar man-person. He passed right by Rudolph and started rubbing his head up against Latina.

Vint had been told that if any unfamiliar man-people approached Latina, he could attack them. But seeing how Latina was having a friendly discussion with him, Vint realized that if he were to defeat this male, Latina would chew him out. On top of that, for some reason, Vint sensed Latina's scent on the man.

Since he was having trouble making a decision, Vint decided to just leave him be.

"Latina... what's that...?" Rudolph said, asking the obvious question about the blatantly suspicious creature in front of him.

"Huh? Vint's... a dog?"

"Why did you say that like a question?"

"Um... He's a bit of a different sort of dog? That's why," Latina hurriedly replied while straightening out Vint's clothing.

After saying goodbye to Rudolph and thanking him for escorting her back, Latina and Vint headed for the attic. While giving him a week's worth of brushing, Latina asked Vint about his absence.

"Where did you go? You suddenly disappeared, so I was worried."

"Went to Daddy's place."

"Daddy?"

"Mommy bit Daddy, and Daddy yielded. Mommy's the strongest."

"...?"

The language and culture of mythical beasts had developed separately from the rest of the world, so even Latina had trouble understanding it, despite having been able to learn the most common language used by humans, that of the western continent, in a week. The expressions and words used were entirely unrelated.

Latina tilted her head now and again, but she managed to grasp that Vint had gone back home to visit, apparently. Without the leader of the soaring wolves knowing it, his own son had leaked the details of his domestic dispute.

Latina hugged Vint tight and sank her face into his now-soft and fluffy fur.

“Latina?”

“Sorry, Vint... Can we stay like this, just for a bit?”

Vint wagged his tail, and feeling relieved to see him not seem to mind at all, Latina brought her cheek up to the wolf cub’s fur again and felt his warmth.

“Why... can’t I do it right...?” Latina muttered with a sigh, the sadness in her voice readily apparent. She’d tried her best to hold it back all day, but the moment she uttered those words of weakness, her vision grew blurry. Starting to snifle, she closed her eyes tight.

When she was little, all of the adults around her seemed to really have their acts together. She thought they could do anything with ease. She wanted to hurry up and become an adult so she could be one of them. She’d grown taller and was Theo’s “big sis” now, so she thought that she was closer to being an adult than she used to be. But apparently, she was still just a little kid. She couldn’t even hold down the fort without ending up in tears; she hadn’t grown at all. Of course she’d be treated like a child.

If she became a proper adult, she’d surely be able to do things

right, too.

“Will I... ever become a true grown-up...?”

“Woof,” her friend said in a quiet, gentle voice to comfort her. Unable to stand it any longer, Latina ended up wiping away her flowing tears with her palms, and then collapsed in a heap.

Seeing how red Latina’s eyes were as she returned to the first floor from her room, Rita furrowed her eyebrows in anger.

“What am I going to do about that damn idiot?” Rita muttered in a dangerous tone.

“He was so stupid this time that he even left me speechless, but... I think he’s got a lot on his mind right now, too, so... I think you should take that into consideration, at least a little,” Kenneth said, trying to defend Dale.

“Listen, Kenneth, you’re always soft on that idiot, but I’m only Latina’s ally,” Rita said to her husband. She lifted a single eyebrow. “I need put him in his place enough for Latina. She can’t bring herself to complain.”

“For Sis?” Theo butted in.

“That’s right. You think so too, Theo, right?” Rita asked, seeking agreement from her child.

“Right!” Only understanding that this was about his beloved “sister,” Theodore parroted his mother.

Kenneth looked troubled because he knew that Rita was one of the few people who would squabble with his “little bro” without holding back, and also because he couldn’t think of any further words to cover for Dale.

“Rita? Kenneth? What’s wrong?” Latina asked, tilting her head at the harsh look on Rita’s face. Aside from her bloodshot eyes,

Latina didn't look all that different from usual.

Rita responded with a smile, shaking her hands back and forth. "It's nothing. Vint sure has gotten fluffy, hasn't he?"

Latina seemed perplexed by her response as well. She then looked at Kenneth and nonchalantly asked, "Kenneth, do you need help with work tonight?"

"You can just come back to work tomorrow morning. You were working in an unfamiliar environment, so you're probably more tired than you think. Just get some proper rest."

Latina looked a little down in response.

Kenneth gave a sigh and then continued addressing his apprentice. "Don't act so recklessly as to throw yourself so hard at your work that you don't have time to think about anything else, Latina."

"Sorry..."

"You've got nothing to apologize for."

"But... um... I..."

Latina tried to continue, but Kenneth put his hand, which was larger than Dale's, on top of her head and patted it like he'd done ever since she was little. He'd always patted her head harder than Dale had.

"Rita will just man the floor up through tonight, too. In exchange, could you dote on Theo plenty? We can't do that as well as you, after all."

"Sis?" Theo asked, sounding happy because he more or less understood what his father was saying. He *pitter-pattered* over to Latina, then looked up at her expectantly.

“Kenneth...”

“It’s a huge help having you here, Latina.”



With Kenneth's words, the tears that had supposedly stopped blurred Latina's vision once more.

Right now, she was losing all confidence in herself and her actions, so she wanted a reason to be positive about herself more than anything else. She wanted a reason for it to be alright to be here.

With a tearful voice, Latina muttered the word she needed to say rather than "I'm sorry."

"Thank you..."

The clash between Rita and Dale may have had its basis in this part of Latina's nature, Kenneth thought.

For Latina, Dale's very presence brought her mental stability. When he was by her side, her worries and concerns would be wiped away with his doting. It was when Dale *wasn't* around that Latina would become insecure and depressed, looking like a whole different person than her usual cheery self. No matter how much this state was described to those familiar with her, it was hard to imagine without actually seeing her like that. There was just that big of a gap compared to her usual self.

If Dale had seen her like this, he surely wouldn't have gone and let his emotions drive him to flee. Though he treated her like a child, he had also always doted on the girl who had been mature beyond her years ever since she was young, so he was unconsciously soft on her.

"Sis!"

Vint circled around jealously as he watched Latina hug Theo tight. Watching on, Kenneth thought on just what he could do.

When Latina returned to work in the Dancing Ocelot the next morning, she seemed to have recovered quite a bit, at least on the

surface. However, while Latina would bear her loneliness by herself in the attic when Dale was gone, she'd taken Vint with her to her room the night before. Even so, Kenneth and the others didn't say anything. If the warmth of another helped to heal her at least a little, then that was what she should do.

Even though Latina was depressed, Vint was in high spirits thanks to the girl paying more attention to him than usual.

Seeing Latina dart about the shop in a hurry once more, the expressions on the faces of the regulars visiting for breakfast grew twenty percent brighter. Kenneth figured from the looks of it that tonight would be far busier than it had been this past week, and he decided to stock up more than usual. Even if she hadn't planned it, Latina ended up so busy that she didn't have time to think about anything else, just like she'd wanted.

It was only inevitable, but things were busier at lunchtime, too. Rita was pregnant, but Kenneth no longer needed to try to handle all the work on his own. He had Latina to help with things like buying goods and equipment and cleaning the linens.

Dale wasn't the only one who'd had to endure Latina's absence. Even if the workload was something Kenneth originally handled alongside his wife, he hadn't imagined doing it alone would be *that* rough. He was made fully aware of just how much of a help his "apprentice" who worked in perfect sync with him had been.

Kenneth thought that Dale running away was stupid, but he also figured that his "little bro" needed time to cool his head. He'd just gone about it the wrong way. Right now, the culprit in question was probably on the move somewhere, holding his head in his hands over what he'd done.

Latina should be a little more selfish, too, and be willing to say that she's lonely or doesn't like something.

Latina was such a patient, good child that the adults around her ended up relying on her without even realizing it. When he'd had to toil away without any time for a break, Kenneth realized that he was guilty of that as well.

Just as Kenneth had predicted, that night the Dancing Ocelot started filling up with customers early, and by its usual peak hour it was beyond just packed, with customers willing to stand about and drink. Latina alone wasn't enough to handle things, so Rita ended up manning the floor, too. Vint was also around, so fortunately he was able to take care of keeping an eye on Theo.

Latina listened to several orders flying in at once and immediately understood them all without even repeating them back. Since she remembered the customers' faces rather than just their tables, she didn't make any mistakes when carrying out their food. When she needed to take a second to do calculations for making change, she wore a pleasant smile on her face.

That was the sort of waitress that Latina was. Her presence had drawn this crowd here to begin with, but if she wasn't around, they'd never be able to handle such a huge workload.

"Rita, you're pregnant, so you shouldn't push yourself. I can handle things on my own."

"I'm not intending to, so I'll be fine. And *you* shouldn't be pushing yourself too hard either, Latina."

"I'm fine."

"If I think you're pushing yourself too hard, I'll use my authority as one of the owners to force you to take a break."

"I'm fine! I won't push myself!"

To a workaholic like Latina, a forced break would be entirely unwelcome. Latina shook her head from side to side in a fluster.

“I get the feeling she really will overwork herself,” Rita said, looking astounded as she watched the girl *pitter-patter* about hurriedly from customer to customer.

Around then, Latina sensed a new customer coming in and turned to greet him with a smile, only for her expression to return to normal.

“Welco—Rudy?”

“H-Hey...”

Looking like he felt a bit awkward, Rudolph’s gaze darted around the inside of the shop. It was like he was overwhelmed by the crowd filling the store. The place was filled to the brim with intimidating, muscle-bound middle-aged men. Even someone like Rudolph, who was used to such sights from his time in the guards, got a small case of cold feet.

“What’s up?”

“The only reason to visit a bar is for the food or the alcohol, right?”

Happening to hear his response, a number of the regulars who were also guards wore lukewarm expressions on their faces. It was common knowledge that he didn’t come here for either of those things. Latina, however, didn’t realize that.

“Is that so? Right now, we’re packed, so there aren’t any seats open...” Latina said, looking a bit troubled as she addressed her childhood friend.

“I don’t mind. He can join me,” one of the regulars shouted out.

Latina looked fairly relieved, but a chill ran down Rudolph’s spine.

“Captain,” Latina said in a tone like she was little girl again, smiling at the man. “You’re alright with sharing a table?”

“It’s not as if we aren’t acquainted. Come on, have a seat over here.”

“Thank you.”

To Latina, even this man who led the group of ruffians known as the town guard of Kreuz was nothing more than one of the nice middle-aged men who had doted over her since she was little.

That wasn’t the case for Rudolph, though. As a member who was at the bottom of the organization and still learning the ropes, this man was high up in the clouds at the very top. And all the other members of his table stood in the upper ranks of the guards in terms of position and ability. Rudolph got the feeling that he wouldn’t be able to force anything down his throat at such a table.

To the middle-aged men, it was like they’d found an interesting toy. And with him by their side, their favorite adorable waitress would likely come by their table more often than usual.

That boy was that valuable, and he had ended up at the most terrifying table in the shop.

“What will you have, Rudy?”

“Um...”

“Hey, Schmidt, you don’t need to hold back. Come on, drink up!”

“R-Right!”

“You’re still just half a man, so start with this much.”

“Right!”

Seeing her childhood friend gulp down the mug he was handed, Latina turned around and hurried into the kitchen. At this rate, he'd come crashing down before long. She grabbed a large glass and filled it to the brim with water.

The concepts of harassment from a superior or being forced to drink didn't exist in this world. If a superior said it, then that may not be enough to turn white to black, but you'd have to think of it as a dark grey. Society was unreasonable like that.

It was improper to have children drink alcohol, but then the question became what constituted an "adult." In Laband, one was generally said to have come of age when they turned eighteen. But there were also places like Dale's home village of Tislow where one was treated like an adult at fifteen. As such, age couldn't be used as the basis for whether or not one was an adult, and generally, such milestones were nothing but a yardstick for roughly deciding when someone could work, be independent, or get married.

In Kreuz, most children started learning a trade while working in a subordinate position after finishing primary school. After that period of apprenticeship, they started to be treated as proper adults.

If one was earning money by their own hand and living independently, it was only natural to say that they were capable of being responsible for themselves. And so there was no reason to find fault with Rudolph, who had become a proper member of the guards, and adventurers of the same age who took on requests drinking alcohol at the Dancing Ocelot.

Even so, Rudolph was still young, and there was no way he could handle the strong liquor recommended by the veteran men, so after chugging it down, he started hacking. As he coughed and choked with tears in his eyes, the middle-aged men who had once faced such an initiation themselves broke out in hearty laughter.

“Are you alright, Rudy?” Latina came running with the water, clearly flustered. While rubbing his back, she rapidly chanted off a simple detoxification spell. “You shouldn’t push yourself when drinking. It’s dangerous.”

She’d lived at the Ocelot since she was young, so she was accustomed to seeing rookie adventurers collapse from acute alcohol poisoning and drunkards pass out from overdrinking. Worried about such customers, Latina learned detoxification magic to heal such symptoms, but that led to a vicious circle, as it made the customers feel more comfortable drinking themselves dead-drunk. In this specific magic alone, Latina was likely more experienced than the priests from the clinic at the temple of Niili.

After having Rudolph drink his water, Latina furrowed her brows a bit and faced the regulars at the table.

“Captain, you did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Latina asked, trying to act intimidating, but there was no gravity or power behind it.

“Ooh, scary!” Unfortunately, her words only served to delight the middle-aged men.

And as a result, they established that by messing with her childhood friend, they could make the naturally kind, adorable little waitress come running out of concern. They brought their hands together in prayer to thank the gods for this revelation.

By the way, having lived surrounded by drunken middle-aged men since she was little, Latina understood that reasoning didn’t work on drunks, so she gave them some leeway. The men were also aware of this, and they knew they could get away with this much without her hating them, so they didn’t hold back.

As the sad result of all that, Rudolph was promptly crushed. It was bad enough that if Latina hadn’t been around to heal him, it wouldn’t have been strange for him to be immediately carried off

to the Niili clinic.

But even after all that, Rudolph wasn't discouraged at all, and he visited the Dancing Ocelot again the next day.

Many young adventurers saw Dale's absence as the perfect chance to make a move and get close to their idol, Latina, so they were clearly hostile towards Rudolph, who was unusually friendly with her.

Even the easy-going Latina noticed the strained atmosphere and looked confused.

"Did you get in a fight or something?"

"No, I didn't."

"Hmm... Well, if anything happens then tell me, alright?"

After having that conversation with Latina, Rudolph took a sip of his sweet cider. At other shops, drinking such a girly drink would get you laughed at and called a kid, but it was a popular item at the Dancing Ocelot. The reason why was incredibly simple: it was part of their favorite adorable waitress's special menu. Regardless of taste, Latina was bad with alcohol in general, and apparently even sampling was beyond her. She'd been seen having just a sip, a half-filled small glass's worth, and turning deep red.

"You get along with that lad pretty well, don't ya, little lady?" Sylvester called out, having noticed Rudolph and Latina talking.

Not seeming to grasp the intent behind the question, Latina tilted her head a bit and approached his table, then nonchalantly responded, "You know him, right, Mr. Syl? He's Rudy, and he used to come here a lot. He's a town guard now."

"Um, little lady..."

“He’s no longer in training, so he’s started coming to the Ocelot,” Latina declared earnestly, and Sylvester responded with an awkward smile.

Staring at Latina as she headed back to work, Sylvester gave a sigh.

“You’ve got no room to talk about him either, little lady...” Sylvester muttered into his glass, so quietly that no one else could hear. Whether it made them feel anxious or jealous, Rudolph’s feelings were clear to everyone around him, but Latina herself remained oblivious. There were those who sneered at Rudolph for that, but Latina was so blatantly clueless that Rudolph’s rivals in love couldn’t help but see themselves in his place and feel sympathy for him.

However, Rudolph wasn’t discouraged, and he continued his daily visits to the Ocelot. He was well aware of how dense his childhood friend was and challenged that fact head-on. That much wouldn’t cause him to lose heart. He’d gone to see her every day as her old friend only for his feelings to be ignored. He had grown so used to it that he didn’t even realize how sad the whole thing was.

And in that way, he came to realize that ever since the “disaster of the night festival,” the relationship between Dale and Latina had become strangely strained and that Dale had left for work without settling things between them.

Rudolph knew that Latina was always looking at someone else. Though Latina looked like the youngest of all of them because of her small build and her clumsy speech, her friends all knew that in truth, she was mentally the most mature. They were aware of her feelings for her guardian—the feelings which could only be called “love” despite her young age.

Latina had never referred to Dale as her “parent” even once to her friends. She’d been sharp ever since she was young, so she

understood that he was her guardian and was responsible for looking out for her. On top of that, she frequently joyously talked about Dale as someone precious to her.

That whole time, she was always chasing after him.

She couldn't reduce the gap in their ages, but because she wanted to become an adult as soon as possible and be treated as one, she strived beyond her age at work and chores. She was a hard worker by nature, but more than that, she was pushing herself, wanting to be a woman who could always stand by his side.

Rudolph knew all that, and because he knew Dale was the one that Latina had feelings for, he was also striving his hardest to catch up to the other man. That large, far-off back of his couldn't be easily reached, no matter how hard Rudolph ran or pushed himself. But even so, not wanting to give up on his feelings, he desperately struggled to improve himself and had grown stronger, and even though he was acknowledged and accepted by those around him, it still wasn't enough, and he pushed himself further.

And so, Rudolph understood how Latina felt better than anyone. They had both spent so much time trying to catch up to Dale, and while their reasons may have been different, their feelings were similar.

After thinking on such matters, Rudolph gave a heavy sigh.

No matter how I look at it, I can't help but think this is my only chance...

He arrived at the same conclusion no matter how often he thought it over, and he had to hold himself back from sighing again.

If I wait for Latina to get completely back to normal... I probably won't have a chance to say it...

Dale had been absent for several days now, and at a glance, Latina seemed to be acting like her normal self. But to Rudolph, it still looked like she was pushing herself somehow. He had long since realized that he felt jealous that *that guy* could cause her to feel so depressed.

Rudolph looked down into his glass and lost himself further in his thoughts. Even though the hustle and bustle around him grew distant, his ears unconsciously picked up on Latina's voice.

I can't worry about taking advantage of her weakness...

He wasn't in a position where he could act cool and say that he'd never do such a thing. He was fully aware that things weren't so easy for him that he could say that. It was well known that on the field of battle, you needed to take advantage of any chance you got.

If I could just give up on her that easily without even saying anything, then... things wouldn't have been like this for years now.

Hearing Latina desperately speak up during the night festival, her ears red as she forced the trembling in her voice to stop, had made him feel dizzy. He felt jealous of Dale having that voice and expression pointed towards him, and also despaired at the thought that things would end with his own feelings left unspoken.

Now that he'd been given a second chance, he couldn't let it slip away so easily.

When Dale was standing watch, it was just too terrifying, and Rudolph didn't think he could do it. If there was even the slightest chance, it had to be now, when Latina had her guard down.

While thinking rather pathetic thoughts, Rudolph's determination showed on his face, only for Latina to suddenly pop up far

closer than he'd expected. He was so shocked that he almost dropped his glass, but he instead hurriedly put it down on the table. It came down with a clatter that reflected the turbulent state of his heart.

"What's wrong, Rudy? You look serious. Is something troubling you?" Her adorable face was clouded with concern, and her big grey eyes stared straight at him without a hint of shyness. She hadn't changed since they were little.

Oblivious to the sort of affections and desires members of the opposite sex pointed her way, she got every bit as close to Rudolph as she had when they were children. She had no idea how much she was stirring him up as she defenselessly smiled at him and sat close enough that he could touch her just by reaching out a bit.

"Rudy?"

As she called out to him again, he came back to his senses. As he let out a big gulp, he swallowed down his own nervousness as well without thinking.

Latina didn't realize any of this and instead looked at the glass that Rudolph had loudly set down. She looked happy to see that it was almost empty.

"Rudy, you drink that a lot. How is it? Is it tasty? Or do you think something a little less sweet would be better?" Latina asked, leaning forward and pressing him a bit; she was concerned with his evaluation of the menu she had put together.

"No, I think this is good," Rudolph responded, giving his assent.

Hearing his response, she broke out in a carefree smile, like a blooming flower. In that instant, Rudolph earnestly thought, *She's so cute*, and forgot all about the worries that had just been

agonizing him. All that was left was obsessive determination to say those simple words he'd regret leaving unsaid.

"Latina."

"What is it?"

"I love you."

"Huh?" Latina blinked her big, wide eyes, not understanding the meaning of those simple words he'd so frankly stated.

"I've been coming to this shop to see you."

"...Wha?"

"I've always loved you. That's all I wanted to say..."

"Wha...?"

Unable to look Latina in the eyes as she made that strange sound in response, Rudolph ended things there and stood up from his seat. Without even looking back, he headed straight for the shop's exit.

As the lukewarm night air cooled his flushed cheeks, the energy drained from him. Even the massive, staggering sound—a sound like a table being flipped over—coming out of the shop that he'd just exited didn't reach Rudolph over the thumping of his own heart.

"What is it? What happened?!"

Hearing that tremendous sound, Kenneth came flying out of the kitchen and found Latina had collapsed on the floor amongst scattered plates and glasses.

"What happened?!" Kenneth asked about the clearly abnormal situation, a serious expression on his face.

“Wah!” Latina, who had for some reason been absentmindedly hugging a tray, shot up with a start. She started looking over the scattered dinnerware again. “I-I dropped it... I-I’m sorry...!”

“You’re not hurt, are you?” Kenneth asked, softening his voice and expression when he saw that there didn’t seem to be anything seriously wrong. Far later than she should have, Latina realized that everything had broken.

“Wah... I’m sorry, the plate’s broken...! Ow!”

She had reflexively reached out for the shattered pieces only to suddenly pull her hand back. Apparently, she had cut herself.

“Are you alright?”

“It’s just a little cut... I have healing magic, so I’ll be fine...”

“Just stay still and hold on a moment. I’m going to go grab something to clean this up with.”

“Wah... I’m sorry...” Latina said in a pathetic voice, her shoulders sagging. Leaving her behind, Kenneth returned to the kitchen.

Though Latina had helped out in the Dancing Ocelot since she was little, she’d never made such a big mistake before. Kenneth grabbed a broom while tilting his head.

The regulars who had seen her slip-up were flustered, too, though for a different reason than Kenneth. After all, they’d seen their idol being confessed to.

It may not have been true for all of them, but for most of the customers, each and every adorable action of the shop’s signature waitress had become their favorite “dish” to pair with their drinks, so the shop’s regulars were always watching over Latina.

And then, the “confession” happened. Depending on how

things played out, they may have needed to punish Rudolph, but before they could even start to threaten him, he had left the shop. And seeing how dismayed Latina was in the aftermath, they had bigger things to worry about.

There was no chance here to tease her or poke fun. This was the first huge incident since the founding of her fan club, so no one could even form a quip.

“Gwah!”

“Latina?!” Kenneth called out, flustered as he saw Latina slip on a small puddle on the floor and fall flat on her rear.

Nobody had ever seen Latina like this before.

After Rudy left, Latina’s mind was clearly somewhere else, so she kept slipping up.

For example: She forgot orders. She brought the same dish to a customer twice. She forgot what she’d just been doing and glanced around. She fell down numerous times.

“Waaaaah... I’m sorry, I’m sorry...!”

Each time, she’d bow repeatedly and apologize, her face red and her voice pathetic.

As the regulars all completely forgave her mistakes and clumsiness, feeling like they’d gotten to see something rare, this was truly a pitiable incident.

Latina remained like that into the next morning, too. She even screwed up the omelets she always made, with half of them turning into scrambled eggs, while she burned a number of the rest. Screwing up even tasks she should have long since mastered, like omelet-making, caused Latina to fall into a deeper and deeper state of confusion, making for a vicious cycle.

“Sis, the eggs are bitter.”

“S-Sorry, Theo...”

“You’re hopeless, Sis.” While chewing away at breakfast, Theo spoke his opinion bluntly and with a lack of tact that was only allowed of young children like him.

“Woof!” It was an arrogant comment, but Vint agreed, causing Latina’s shoulders to droop even more pathetically.

After finishing off her morning work in such a way, Latina immediately headed to her friend’s house.

“Um... He did it now, of all times?”

Chloe had been surprised to find Latina knocking on her door earlier than usual, but after hearing what had happened the night before, that was the first question out of her mouth.

“‘Now’?!”

“Well, I guess that good-for-nothing did well for himself, having finally confessed... Still, to think that he’s only just getting around to it now...”

“Huh? What? You knew, Chloe?”

“It’s not just me. Aside from you, everyone else probably already realized it, Latina.”

“Whaaaaaaa?!” Latina shouted out in surprise, and with her cheeks beet-red, she tried to get a handle on the situation. “So... since the night festival, when we saw him for the first time in a while?”

Latina’s guess was far off the mark, and Chloe silently shook her head from side to side.

“No, you see, Rudy’s lovesickness has been getting worse and worse alllll this time.”

Seeing her friend tilt her head after being told all that, Chloe let out an audible sigh. “Rudy’s loved you since before we started going to school.”

“Huuuuuuuh?!”

Chloe had expected it, but Latina’s reaction made her expression grow even more awkward.

“Huh, but... Rudy was always so mean!”

“Yeah, he sure was easy to understand.”

“He was always teasing me.”

“Yeah, like I said, he was easy to figure out.”

“What was ‘easy to figure out’?”

“Yup. That’s the problem, sure enough.”

Over their long years of knowing each other, Chloe had come to get a vague sense that Latina had no idea that someone could end up teasing a person *because* they liked them.

The natural airhead was completely removed from what was thought of as common sense. Chloe would occasionally forget it, but her friend was a member of a different race, was born in a different country, and had a whole different sense of values.

“Rudy always acted that way to hide his shyness.”

“Huh...? Then... Rudy, he... always...?”

“Yup. The whole time.”

“I... didn’t realize at all...”

“Well, Rudy didn’t think we realized either, but we did.”

“Chloe... before, you said ‘everyone’...”

“Right, ‘everyone.’ Not just Sylvia, but Marcel and Anthony... and other people probably realized, too.”

“Waaaah...”

Latina’s gaze darted about nervously. Her face was red, and she looked like she was about to break out in tears.

“I don’t know how I can even look everybody in the eye next time I see them...”

“Before that, you should think about what you’re going to do the next time you see Rudy.”

“Wah...! Right, Rudy’s been coming to the shop every day...! What should I do...?”

“He’d been coming to see you, right?”

“R-Right, that’s what he said... What should I do...?!”

Seeing her friend at such a loss and panicking from the depths of her heart shocked Chloe, and that proved that she still wasn’t immune to such situations.

At any rate, the people around Latina have clearly been over-protective. Looking half-astounded, Chloe gave another sigh.

Latina was a true beauty with a great personality, and Chloe would proudly brag about being her best friend anywhere and everywhere, but apparently no one had ever confessed their love to her up until now. Chloe could only figure that the people around Latina had been driving them all off.

There was a limit when it came to being overprotective. Chloe figured there were some folks who wanted Latina to retain the purity she'd had since she was little.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"What *am* I going to do? How am I going to look them in the face...?"

"Not that, about Rudy. What are you going to do about him?"

"Rudy said he just wanted me to hear that, but..."

"There's no way that's good enough. What response are you going to give him?"

"I really do have to give him a response, don't I..." Looking like she was at a loss, Latina stared straight at the ground. "I've never even thought about it. I had no idea Rudy liked me."

"...I know."

"Why me?"

"You should ask Rudy that, right?"

"I mean... I'm a devil, and we have different lifespans... and I wouldn't be able to have children..."

"Latina... shouldn't that normally be your problem and not his?"

Latina's gaze lifted just a bit so she could see her friend's face.

"Are you alright with us humans? We don't live as long as devils, and not all of us can use magic, either. We're a weak race."

"Chloe?"

“You think of yourself as being below everyone else way too much. You’re beautiful, which is a special privilege in and of itself. And the way that you’ll pretty much always stay young and pretty, don’t you think that’d be ideal from a man’s point of view?”

“Wha...?”

Of course, Chloe didn’t think her friend was capable of looking at things so philosophically, but she said it anyway because she thought that it wouldn’t be strange at all if her friend actually valued herself that highly.

“You think too little of yourself, Latina.”

“But, I...”

“You’re my precious best friend. And I won’t forgive anyone who speaks badly of my best friend, even if that’s you, Latina.”

“Chloe...”

“Do you think I don’t have an eye for judging people?”

“No!” Latina said while swinging her head from side to side, flustered. Her expression brightened just a bit, and Chloe continued on.

“I don’t know happened to you back in your home village, Latina. I only know you as my precious best friend that I met after she came to Kreuz. But that’s enough for me to proudly declare how important you are to me.”

“Chloe...”

“So you can have some confidence in yourself. If you just keep speaking ill of yourself, then it’ll be like you’re putting down Rudy too, right?”

“Right... I got it. I’ll give it some proper thought.”

“Still, it’s a proven fact that he is an idiot, though,” Chloe said with a serious expression on her face as she denounced their childhood friend.

“Wah?!”

Latina was so surprised that she forgot all her concerns for a moment.

While holding herself back from laughing at how Latina had acted just as expected, Chloe pointed a mischievous smile at her friend.

“Next time I meet Sylvia, we’re going to talk up a storm about this, so prepare yourself, alright?”

“Wah...”

Sensing that her red-faced, flustered best friend was starting to act more like her normal self, Chloe’s thoughts raced as to what she should say next. Her friend was overly serious, so it was good for the people around her to mess with her every now and again. Or at least, that’s what Chloe had claimed in their long years of knowing each other.

After returning from Chloe’s house, Latina discussed what had happened the night before with Kenneth. She didn’t hide anything, telling him of how her friend had confessed to her and how she’d been so shaken by it that she had become a wreck.

“So I was so surprised that I didn’t know what to do... and I made all kinds of mistakes. Sorry for letting personal matters affect my work.”

“Everybody has times like that. Just learn from it, and do a little better next time.”

“Right. I really am sorry. Also, Kenneth... I think Rudy will probably come today, too. Is it okay if I take a little time off of work then to talk to him?”

“Got it. Just give me a shout when the time comes,” Kenneth responded, holding himself back from sighing. He couldn’t imagine how the customers in the shop would react if the two had that discussion there. At the very least, he couldn’t let them get ahold of anything to stab at the wounds in the kid’s heart and traumatize him. After all, he was one of Latina’s precious childhood friends. That needed to be taken into account, at least to some degree.

So, it’s finally happened, huh?

That thought made Kenneth want to let off a chain of rapid-fire sighs.

From Kenneth’s perspective, the reason a bunch of lovestruck men hadn’t swarmed Latina was because her “guardians” gave them glares and sharp looks; also, none of them would let any other fellow pursuer try to get ahead. Now that it had happened for the first time, the current equilibrium would surely collapse.

I was hoping Dale could make things clear before something like this happened...

What invigorated those who had fallen for Latina more than anything else was Dale’s absence.

Latina couldn’t stay a kid forever, so how much should he protect her from now on? How much should he leave things up to her? This was a difficult subject for her greatest supporter during Dale’s absence—her mentor, Kenneth.

Before long, the time finally came.

Sensing a new customer had entered, Latina reflexively turned

around and called out, “Welco—”

Realizing it was the person she’d been waiting for, Latina gripped the tray she was holding tighter so she wouldn’t drop it this time. “...Rudy.”

“Hey...”

The memory of yesterday was still fresh, so it may have been only natural that the attention of everyone in the shop fell on the awkward pair.

Latina called out to Kenneth, and then brought Rudolph through the kitchen and out behind the shop. That was the backyard where Theo and Vint often played, and it had a lived-in feel that the storefront lacked.

As if trying to clear away the unpleasant silence, Latina awkwardly but clearly spoke up. “Um... Um, Rudy... About yesterday...”

“Right.”

“I was surprised. I had no idea.”

“I know. I was aware that you never saw me that way, Latina.”

Rudolph silently gazed at Latina as her breath caught in her throat. Then, he kept talking. “I also know that you’ve been looking at someone else all this time, so I didn’t think I’d get an answer from you... I just wanted to express my feelings. That’s what I was thinking.”

“Rudy...” Latina gulped, then looked down at the ground. In order to regain her composure, she took a deep breath. Chloe had told her how Rudy felt, but it was still a little rough hearing it from him in person.

Before long, Latina raised her face again. And then, with

slightly upturned eyes and an embarrassed blush on her cheeks, she stated the words he had expected but least wanted to hear. "I'm sorry, Rudy..."

"...I see," he forced out, his voice hoarse. He was only able to say it because he'd more or less already known what her response would be.

"I'm sorry, but I love Dale."

"I know..."

"Dale still treats me like a child and won't see me that way at all, but I still can't give up."

"I know..."

"So... I'm sorry. I can't accept your feelings. But..." Latina pointed a slightly awkward smile at Rudolph. It was different from her usual one, but still somehow enchanting. "Thank you, Rudy. Thank you... for loving me."

Her blushing face, her watering eyes, and her gentle, sweet voice... They were all things he'd wanted her to point towards him. That's why Rudolph gained the courage to push himself a little further.

"I won't give up, either," he said, looking straight into Latina's grey eyes. He realized that he was probably so red that he wouldn't lose out to Latina, but even so, his voice didn't falter in the least.

"Rudy...?"

"I know who you like, and that he still hasn't accepted your feelings... So I intend to keep on waiting until you're willing to give up on him."

Latina didn't say anything.

“I hope that you’ll remember me if that time comes.”

For an instant, the light from the shop reflected off of something hanging in front of Rudolph’s chest. There was no way Latina didn’t know what that was, as it had once been a part of her. She finally understood the reason that he had treated it so preciously.

As she drew close to him and reached a slim finger out to touch it, Rudolph froze. She grasped it and brought her lips close to it, as if to blow on it.

“Thank you, Rudy.” She imbued that former part of herself with her feelings of gratitude. “I’m sorry. But I also really, truly want to say thank you, too...”

For some reason, even when Latina let go, Rudy still felt like a little bit of warmth remained.



After watching Latina head back into the Dancing Ocelot, Rudolph leaned his back up against the wall and then slumped to the ground.

His voice caught in his throat.

Even though he'd known what Latina would say, it was of course still hard to hear. It was obviously still painful.

Regardless, he didn't regret expressing his feelings. It was a good thing; he'd gone from someone she saw as just a childhood friend to someone she recognized as a member of the opposite sex. That's what he told himself, at least.

He'd continued to act brave in front of Latina. He somehow managed to make it through.

He didn't want to look pathetic in front of the girl he liked. He didn't want to lose to that man whose back he was chasing after. But putting up a front and acting tough was the most that Rudolph could manage as he was now.

"Is everything good?" Kenneth asked as Latina returned to the kitchen. He sounded concerned.

"Yeah," Latina responded with a nod, looking like she'd managed to clear her head.

She looked like her old self from before her relationship with Dale had gotten thrown out of order. Even the unclouded smile she wore as she briskly carried out her work was the same as it used to be.

Even when Latina changed into her pajamas and combed out her hair that night in the attic, her expression looked as though her sorrows had been cleared away.

"I've decided to tell Dale properly," she said to Vint, who was

lying by her side, her voice still remaining steady.

“Woof.”

She hadn’t noticed the feelings of the childhood friend who had been near her for so long. She realized she’d been quite egotistical in thinking she could express her feelings to Dale with such insufficient words. It was obvious that someone wouldn’t understand everything you were feeling just by being by your side.

As long as those were feelings that she couldn’t give up on easily, she would need to be willing to try as many times as it took. She hadn’t thought Dale would accept them immediately, anyway.

“I’m going to try again. And if that fails too, then I can just keep on trying.”

“Woof.”

“Before that, though, I need to apologize to Dale for causing all this trouble. Then, I’ll have to do things again properly.”

She hugged Vint tight, and the grim, pained expression on her face was already gone. Now, only pure determination remained in her eyes.

“I already knew that Dale saw me as a child, so I won’t get discouraged over something like this.”

“Woof.”

“So from tomorrow on, I’ll give it my all again.”

She reaffirmed that her feelings weren’t something she could give up on.

She didn’t have any time to lose heart or grow timid. She was

still far from being her ideal woman. Even if she tried harder and harder, she'd still come up short. Even so, there was still someone out there who had told her he loved her. It hadn't been enough to give her a big head, but she decided to have at least a little confidence in herself. All of her efforts hadn't been in vain.

"I've got no intention of giving up. And if that's the case, I've just got to give it my all!"

"Woof."

Feeling the warmth from her friend cheering her on, Latina's determination only grew more firm.

†

A few days later, a single letter was delivered from the capital to the Dancing Ocelot in Kreuz.

It was a concise message: Dale had fallen ill.

3: The Young Man's Feelings for the Platinum-haired Maiden

Healing magic didn't work on illnesses. And the one that ruled over each and every illness was the Fourth Demon Lord. Everyone knew that; it was common sense.

It was thought that the mana of the Fourth Demon Lord brought about all illness; it was called a "magical element" and was said to possess a unique power other mana lacked.

Officially, it was called a "magical element malfunction," and it threw off the flow of mana and life force. Because such treatments would operate using those things which had been thrown out of order, using magic to directly heal it was extremely difficult, and depending on the circumstances, that magical intervention could end up working against the patient.

The standard treatment was to suppress the symptoms with medicine, use stamina recovery magic if it was possible to do so, and wait for the effect of the magical element to fade and the normal flow of mana to return.

There were afflictions outside of magical element malfunctions, such as malnutrition and parasites, that *could* be treated with healing magic, but the difference was difficult to distinguish at a glance. It was said to be best to leave it to the judgment of the specialists in the temple of Niili.

Dale was sprawled out slovenly atop the bed that had been assigned to him. He rolled about and finally tossed the thick book he had been holding aside. "Ugh... I'm sick of this."

By the third day, Dale had already grown tired of taking it easy and resting up.

“I want to move around... They’d find out if I used my sword, but I should be able to get away with some basic training...”

Whenever he stayed at the duke’s estate for work, Dale would read through books and the like to familiarize himself with the latest information that had been gathered using the family’s position as one of the leading authorities in the nation. It was part of his work so he wouldn’t be looked down upon by nobles for something so trivial as being uninformed. He had no intention of giving anyone an easy weakness to attack. In addition, Dale had also been educated by Master Cornelio, so he liked to continue his studies when he had the time. But now that he was able to do nothing but that, he’d grown bored of it.

“Alright, now then, I’ll just sneakily...”

“My servant said you’d be trying something like that soon,” said Gregor, sounding astounded as he opened the door and entered without asking.

Dale had long since recognized Gregor’s presence. That was why he faced his friend with a bitter expression and flailed about unnaturally, then responded, “I’m sick of this.”

“You’re aware that even though Rose’s treatment with her divine protection has limited the effect of the magical element as much as possible, you still haven’t been cured.”

“I know, and that’s why I’ve been taking it easy like I’m supposed to...”

“The two others who caught it that you had quarantined are recovering, too. Rose was impressed with how you handled the situation.”

“I grew up out in the country. We didn’t have a temple of Niili, so I needed to learn a certain amount of pharmaceuticals and pathology to protect myself.”

That had been part of Dale’s training he had undergone to become the next head of the clan. The training had covered a great range of topics so he could become a leader that could protect his people. Those people were the Tislow clan, and they were feared even by the local lords in the surrounding area. Dale’s education had also been part of the reason the powerful Duke Eldstedt had come to favor him.

“It only happened because of the Second Demon Lord, but my father says he will be punishing the involved individuals who tried to flee and hide to protect themselves.”

“I almost feel sorry for them...”

“We finished investigating the surrounding settlements, but nothing seemed out of place, and we found no one else who was ill. As it’s clearly an abnormal situation, they seem to have kept their distance rather than letting their curiosity get the better of them.”

“In a way, blockading the highway to help cover things up probably helped, too.”

†

After leaving Kreuz and arriving in the capital, Dale was indeed given an assignment.

His task was to confirm Rose’s testimony that she’d had a run-in with the Second Demon Lord after being kidnapped. Normally, just a scouting party would be sent, but because there was a high chance of encountering a demon lord on the mission, it was ruled best to have one with the power to oppose such a being—a hero—accompany them.

The village believed to be the one Rose had testified about had been sealed off from the highway and treated as if it didn't exist. The whole village had been wiped out in a single night, and anyone who went to check it out hadn't returned, so the lord of the land had chosen to try to cover things up. According to Duke Eldstedt, he was a small shot who had chosen to handle things without reporting the abnormality to the government and had decided to "solve" the problem by ignoring it.

At a glance, everything in the village looked clean and tidy. But there was an indescribable, unpleasant feeling in the air. That stillness, which was without even the hint of a person's presence, felt too out of place.

The strangeness of the situation only grew when they checked inside the buildings.

Each and every corpse had been played with, like an infant would handle their toys.

Most likely, to the Second Demon Lord, such things *were* toys.

In one house, there was a "painting" that made even the investigating party, who were used to the battlefield, feel ill. Using one of the walls as a canvas, those "toys" had been pulverized and mashed so thoroughly that they'd long since lost their original shape, but there was no mistaking what they were. It was a truly, utterly repulsive form of "art."

This violence had all occurred inside the buildings, sometimes limited to just a single room. That was why at a glance, despite being the scene of such brutal murders, it looked like nothing was wrong in this silent village.

Feeling terribly nervous, the group at last reached the mansion that was their main target. Because of their investigation, they knew it had been built as a villa for a wealthy merchant.

What they had found when they opened the door was so far from what they'd expected that for a moment, they weren't sure how to proceed. This was the entry hall, where the culprits who kidnapped Rose had been brutally murdered. Countless corpses were... nowhere to be seen.

It had been cleaned so well that not a single chunk of flesh remained, and no blood or gore was stuck to the walls. Only the dark stains on the carpet told of what had happened here.

In the middle of the hall, a young girl in a splendid dress was seated facing them, looking unharmed and as if no time had even passed since Rose had been there. Her empty eye sockets and colorless skin, though, made it obvious that she was no longer alive. She wasn't an undead monster, either. It gave the impression of a terribly tasteless sort of playing with a "doll."

This was clearly a trap. Even so, this was likely Rose's maid Lily, so they also couldn't just leave her be.

Two of the scouts who excelled at detecting traps approached her body, but because it was difficult to avoid tripping the unmanned proximity-detecting trap, the corpse—which was filled with a high concentration of magical elements—exploded before their very eyes.

It had been a parting gift left by the Second Demon Lord, who had figured based on Rose's personality that she would surely return.

It was what could be called a disease bomb, and the two scouts had taken a direct hit.

The remaining members of the party had been a distance away, and with swift judgment fitting their first-rate reputations, they cast a simple wall spell to protect themselves followed by a second spell to seal off the source of the contagion, which helped to keep casualties to a minimum.

In the end, there was no sign of the Second Demon Lord, so they concluded that she was no longer there.

Ultimately, the investigators reached the same decision as the local lord, and the village was abandoned. It would take an extraordinary amount of time for such high magical element levels to lose effect. It wouldn't be at all impossible for a number of high-ranking Niili priests to purify the area, but that wasn't exactly something that could be carried out overnight.

It fell to Dale to treat the two who had directly fallen prey to the trap and suffered a magical element malfunction. It was harder for priests with strong divine protection to be affected by such an illness, so Dale immediately decided that he was the best choice for the job. After all, the sort of highly skilled personnel in their party weren't people that could be seen as disposable.

Along with the two sick men he was treating, Dale was quarantined in a carriage on their way back to the capital and until they reached the temple of Niili there. During the trip, Dale also caught a slight magical element malfunction. But with that said, there were many high-ranking Niili priests like Rose in the capital, and the city was also equipped with the best facilities for treatment.

Dale was stabilized without his condition growing severe or even showing any symptoms that made him seem especially sick. Because of that, he didn't quite feel the need to rest, and ended up being forced into a boring recuperation period.

“Did you send a message to Kreuz?”

“I just explained the bare minimum, but... shouldn't you have written something yourself?”

“Ah, I... I can write a report, but for some reason I'm just not good at letters... And right now, it'd be... kind of hard... to send it, I guess...”

“...Did you have a lover’s quarrel or something?” Thanks to the strange tension hanging in the air, Gregor uncharacteristically tried throwing out a joke.

“N-No...!” Dale overreacted, even though he should have easily picked up on wisecrack. He leaped out of bed, only for Gregor to force him to lie back down on his side.

That reaction, combined with Dale’s recent string of unusual behavior, made Gregor confident that the source of all this was his friend’s adopted daughter.

Normally, when Dale was called for work, he would throw a tantrum about how he didn’t want to leave her, but this time he’d come to the capital on his own without being summoned. That alone was strange enough to make Gregor suspicious.

Gregor was able to come to such conclusions because in many ways, he knew his friend quite well.

“Did something happen?”

“Ugh...”

Dale gave his friend a brief synopsis, mumbling all the while. There was nothing else to do, and he also wanted to spit out what was going around and around in his mind. If Gregor would listen, then that’s what Dale should do.

“Latina...”

“Yeah.”

“She, sees me as, y’know, a member of the opposite sex, and... she confessed that she loves me.”

“I see.”

“You’re accepting this pretty easily...”

“Well, it’s not all that surprising,” Gregor said indifferently.

Dale made a strained expression in response and then kept talking. “That threw me for a loop, so I wanted to cool my head a bit and... I ended up running away.”

“What are you, a kid?”

“I know what I did was wrong...”

Even Dale knew it had been the wrong thing to do. He’d been shaken and had impulsively fled, but after about a day had passed, he cooled down enough to realize that he’d done something ridiculous. But with that said, at this point he couldn’t exactly head back to Kreuz with his tail between his legs, so he’d ended up heading for the capital as planned.

“Even if you ask me what I want my relationship with Latina to be like from now on... I’ve realized that I’ve been trying to avoid thinking about it.”

“I see.” Figuring this would take a while, Gregor summoned a maid and told her to prepare some tea, then sat down on a chair beside Dale’s bed.

“And then, I realized something else...” Just then, a truly strained expression appeared on Dale’s face. “Latina and I are only about ten years apart.”

“You only just realized that?”

“Yeah.” It really was something rather basic to realize *now*. “I mean, at the start, Latina was just so small. She was always sitting on my lap and smiling, and that just left so strong of an impression! But when I thought on it again, I realized that it’s more the sort of age difference you’d see between siblings, rather than a parent and child...”

“I only just recently met her for the first time, but the impression I had from your stories was that of a small child, so... I really was surprised.” Gregor thought back on how Latina looked when he met her in Kreuz the other day. He’d found that there was still some youthfulness to her appearance, but she still looked a proper, well-mannered, mature young lady.

“Oh, yeah. Latina’s cute, isn’t she?!”

“Well, that’s true...”

“Right?” Dale broke out in a smile that showed he was still the same old Dale. “And thinking more on it, it’s not all that rare to find a married couple with that big of an age gap...” he continued, his expression growing serious again.

His “big bro” Kenneth and his wife Rita were about that far apart. When you’re young, such a gap feels huge, but it feels less and less important as you grow older. That was the sort of age gap it was.

“She was just too young when we first met, and that impression stuck with me, but... Latina’s not a kid anymore.” Dale sighed and averted his eyes. “Even if I’m her guardian, I’m a man who isn’t related to her, so... I shouldn’t always be together with Latina the way I have been, right?”

“...There’s no lack of boors out there with suspicious motives, after all.”

“That’s true. As Latina’s guardian, I should’ve realized that...”

When he thought about how Kenneth had pressured him to clearly tell Latina if he was going to accept her feelings, Dale also realized that if he was going to turn her down, he needed to make that clear as well.

If he was going to keep being just her guardian, he’d need to

draw a line between them. He would need to clearly distance himself before she became an “adult,” to nip things in the bud before nasty rumors started floating around about her.

As a man, Dale didn’t care about how crass the rumors about him may get. But for Latina, as a girl, it would be a serious matter if that happened to her, and Dale needed to avoid that.

“It was normal for Latina and me to be close.”

“Dale...”

“Looking at it objectively, well... it probably looked like we had *that* sort of relationship.”

He was now well aware that he was treating her like a little kid. That was why he’d been able to sleep calmly, thinking nothing of how he shared a bed with her.

It wasn’t the sort of thing he should be doing with a girl her age.

“So, what are you planning on doing?”

“Ungh...”

While watching Gregor sip away at the tea the maid had prepared, Dale searched for words.

“I think I probably... want to stay with Latina... I... don’t want her to become someone else’s, and I want her to stay by my side.”

That was probably the simplest response to the feelings he had inside. Even from an outsider’s point of view, it was a clear, simple wish.

He’d accepted that he could die at any moment and had tried not to wish for anything, but there was still one thing he wanted. That was Latina.

Even now, it was painful to think about dying and leaving her behind. But if he could accept that it would happen, then he could at least indulge his selfish desire and spend their limited time together. She would remain by his side, with that gentle, happy, soothing smile.

“In that case, it’s easiest to just go ahead and do it then, right...?” That was the conclusion he had reached.

If she’d stay by his side happily smiling away, even when she grew up a bit, then that would be a truly happy future, right? And if he could be the one to grant her that happiness, then he shouldn’t hope for anything else.

He decided that it was fine for him to be the one to do that for this girl, who he wanted to be happy above all else.

“In the past, I... used to think that I’d end up in a political marriage.”

“Right.” Gregor was also familiar with the unique clan of Tislow. The clan possessed vastly more power than even the lower-ranking nobles of Laband, so obviously the ducal household paid them special attention.

As someone set to become the next head, Dale had no doubts about accepting a political marriage for the good of the clan. He had been prepared to marry someone regardless of their age or appearance, or even someone he was meeting for the first time.

“I was earnestly prepared to marry whoever I needed to, regardless of who it was with or how I felt. I wouldn’t have even had a problem with someone younger than Latina.”

“Such things aren’t at all rare when it comes to political marriages.”

“That’s right.”

When he entrusted the duty of being the next clan head to his younger brother, all that had also gone along with it, but Dale simply hadn't felt like searching for someone to marry.

"So I'm sure that choosing to stay together with my precious Latina will make me happy, too."

He could already imagine the people around him nagging him, saying he was just worrying about himself.

Latina was a devil. As a devil, she had a much longer lifespan than humans. His own joy came from making sure she was happy, but as time went on, the gap between them would continue to widen.

I may end up turning into an old geezer before I even realize it...

It was easy for those around them to imagine Latina remaining young and putting her happiness second to take care of Dale when he grew old. That was a reason to worry. Thinking on it logically, he couldn't imagine it ending up any other way in the future.

"Anyway, I can deal with that another time," Dale said, his tone shifting.

"Huh?" Gregor questioned, taken aback.

"I mean, that's a bridge to cross later," Dale responded in his usual, carefree tone.

"Is that so...?"

"I mean, Latina's still just a kid, after all."

Dale put his hand up into the air and drew a gently sloping curve. Gregor didn't ask what that line, with hardly any ups and downs to it, indicated.

“Figuring out just what to do can wait until Latina’s a little older.” Dale didn’t have an interest in little girls. As a result, the troubled laugh Dale gave seemed to be half out of embarrassment and half due to awkwardness.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Enter.”

The single maid who entered the room with Gregor’s permission looked flustered in a way unfitting of a servant of this estate. As this household was one of the foremost in the nation of Laband, its servants were also thoroughly trained to be first-rate. They should have been able to remain firm when dealing with nearly any situation.

After she whispered her report to Gregor, a look of surprise flashed over his face. Wondering just what was going on, Dale prepared to ask the reason his friend had reacted that way, only for that “reason” to enter the room.

Gregor stood up straight in response, but being in bed, Dale didn’t have a chance to get his appearance in order. He tried to get up and show proper respect, but the man held him back with a single hand.

“Father,” Gregor said. Gregor’s father, a man with a cool gaze and hair that was greying as he entered his twilight years, gave a nod.

His mere presence was enough to make those around him correct their posture. It wasn’t as though he had an especially intimidating appearance; rather, he gave off a gentle, calm air. However, that wasn’t all that there was to the man.

This man, Vladimir Rot Eldstedt, was responsible for the foremost family in Laband, that of Eldstedt. Having “Rot” in one’s name indicated that they were qualified to succeed the Laband

throne. In both name and substance, this man came only after the king in terms of authority in this country.

Dale was bewildered as to why the duke would go out of his way to come here himself. Considering the duke's position, even though Dale was recuperating from his illness, he should have been summoned. But that confusion was blown away in an instant.

There was a girl with familiar sparkling platinum hair staring at him from behind the duke's back, as if trying to hide.

"It would seem that your condition has stabilized."

"Yes," Dale said, looking on the surface as if he'd regained his composure as he responded to the duke. But internally, his disturbance and confusion was boiling up to a peak. The gears in his mind were spinning around so fast that they were almost flying off their axles.

"Your beloved daughter that I've heard so much about has arrived. She came out of concern. It seems she truly cares for you."

"...Yes." Unable to think up a better response, he gave a short reply. With his mind so completely and utterly out of sorts, that was the best he could manage.

In more ways than one, he just wasn't mentally ready yet.

Would it be bad to run away...?

It took his all to shove that pathetic option back out of his mind.

By his side, the girl he should have been fully familiar with looked quite unfamiliar as she formally thanked Duke Eldstedt.

"I am deeply grateful for your generous favor, my lord."

He was such a high-ranking noble that a normal commoner could never hope to stand in his presence even once in their entire life. But even so, though she did seem nervous, Latina didn't tremble or flinch.

Along with her dignified, beautiful appearance, her conduct was also elegant. Even when dealing with such an elite, she didn't look at all abashed.

“Pay it no mind. It's been a feast for my old eyes.”

From the way his eyes grew gentle as he responded, it was clear that she'd earned his favor. As Dale realized that in the back of his mind, he spotted a fluffy tail wagging along behind her.

He barely avoided bursting into laughter.

No matter how adorable Latina may have been, that alone wouldn't have been enough to capture the duke's interest. In his position, the duke would have grown completely accustomed to seeing beautiful noble ladies. However, there likely weren't so many girls with the natural beauty like she had to overwhelm all those around them.

In that case, there must have been something else about her that had caught the duke's interest.

First, she was Dale's adopted child. She was both his greatest weakness and also the easiest way to incur his wrath. It was abundantly clear that if anyone foolishly laid a hand on her, no matter who they may be, he would throw all his might towards getting back at them.

Her unusual hair color also drew attention. It was a rare hue, even though it wasn't a mana trait. Its shine wouldn't even lose out to any jewelry, and it was still unusual even in the imperial court, where the rare and curious gathered.

But more than all that...

L-Latina... Why did you bring the “dog” here...?

It would be strange for someone to *not* be interested if they saw the pup walking behind her. Vint stretched out his wings, which were usually hidden, and scratched away at his neck with his hind leg, relaxing and doing things at his own pace enough to make Dale feel vexed.

It may have spoken to the current chaos in Dale’s mind that, more than Latina’s sudden appearance, he was questioning the fact that Vint had accompanied her. While seeing off the duke, who left the room with an expression on his face that seemed to say he’d want to hear things in detail later, Dale was still internally striving to get a grasp on the situation.

Thanks to the chaotic state of his mind, he thought, *I’ll talk as much as you want, as long as it’s about how cute and adorable Latina is, and what a good girl she is!* And his thoughts continued on with, *Seeing her in person should be proof of just how adorable she is!* Though perhaps his confusion had nothing to do with it.

He couldn’t help but feel jealous as Vint opened his mouth wide and yawned.

Latina remained calm, and her sense of decorum didn’t crumble. Dale had never seen her like this before. He’d always thought of her as a cute, little girl. But those words didn’t fit the beautiful girl that stood before him now.

Now, of all times...

Seeing her like this, he had no words left to object to the people around him who had rebuked him for being so blind.

It could only be said that he’d shut his eyes and ignored reality

up until now.

Even to Dale, the girl in front of them now looked truly grown up. Some of her childish cuteness still remained, but more than that, he realized she really was maturing into a beautiful woman.

While listening to her voice as Latina greeted Gregor, he realized why it hadn't felt real to him.

"Latina..."

"What is it?"

"Why... are you here?"

He was still in shock, so Dale's question was brief and blunt, but it was still enough to cause Latina's expression to soften. Her overly composed, almost frightening beauty crumbled, and she regained her usual adorableness.

"I... heard you... were sick, Dale..."

"Yeah." The second he heard her voice grow hoarse, he thought, *Shit*.

Large tears came streaming from her big grey eyes.

He was already plenty aware of just how terribly, ridiculously weak he was to this girl's tears.

"B-But you heard that I just need a bit of recuperation time and that it isn't anything serious, right?!"

"Yeah," she said, sobbing and giving a small nod, and then she continued, "but, but... I was scared... so scared! I just couldn't calm down until I saw your face...!"

Dale was left confused, but when she kept on talking, he finally understood the reason behind her dismay.

“I was scared that I’d lose you... like Rag...!”

He’d heard about her real father quite some time ago. She’d been young and her vocabulary had been lacking, so her story was missing some elements, but he’d still understood.

Even though her father hadn’t been especially strong, he had continued to protect her over the course of their journey, until everything caught up to him and he ran out of strength, collapsing in that forest. The direct cause of his death was illness: a magical element malfunction.

She had once lost someone precious to her to illness. Apparently the word “illness” held an even more grave meaning for her than he’d thought.

“Latina...”

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry, Dale. I won’t be selfish anymore. I won’t say anything that troubles you...! So, so... don’t go away...! Please, let me stay by your side...!”

Ah, that’s right. She’d always been like this.

She’d lost her family and home when she was very young, so even though children should never need to worry about such things, she’d always tried to protect her own place, where she belonged. She had decided that she needed to be a good girl, never acting childishly selfish or throwing a fit.

Dale had found that part of her personality heart-breaking. He’d tried to pamper her and would have been fine with her acting selfish or mischievous. Wanting her to let her be herself, Dale had wracked his brains for ways to let her do so.

He’d always wanted her to speak her true feelings rather than forcing them down along with her desires. That’s why that response wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear.

He stretched out his arms and hugged Latina, whose shoulders trembled as she sobbed.

Seeing Gregor tactfully leave the room from the corner of his eye, he pulled her in tight.

“Latina...” he whispered, only for her to draw back. “I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry for worrying you, Latina.”

Her response got caught in her throat and she was unable to speak, so Latina simply breathed heavily in Dale’s arms.

“I’m sorry... There’s a lot I want to say, and a lot I *need* to say, but... sorry.”

Latina lightly shook her head as he stroked her hair. Just when had her hair grown this long? He slid his fingertips through it. It had only smelled of soap when she was young, but now he noticed that it had a sweet perfume-like smell to it.

“Latina... I... I’m not your father, but I’m always by your side, so... No, that’s...”

Latina clung tight to Dale’s clothes, showing her unease. Trying to clear away that worry, he stroked her back and wiped away the tears caught on her long eyelashes.

“I want you to stay by my side... from now on, too. Will you stay with me, Latina?”

“Dale...?”



He forced down his embarrassment and wore an awkward smile on his face.

Dale recalled sitting close to Latina like this before and seeing his own reflection in her teary eyes, and just as he was doing now, he also remembered hugging the sobbing girl tightly.

“I’ll definitely die before you do someday, though.” He had said the words he whispered next before, but she heard a different meaning in them now. “So until that time comes, will you stay with me?”

“Dale...!”

“Can we just leave it at that for now? When you’re a little older... I’ll, um... I’ll say it a little more properly.” Thanks to embarrassment and a strange sort of pride getting in the way, he wasn’t able to say any more.

As Dale spoke ambiguously and his gaze wandered, Latina looked straight at him with teary eyes. “Dale, Dale... Um...!”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“Y-Yeah,” said Dale, his voice cracking. After having spoken so indirectly, he hadn’t expected her to say it so bluntly herself.

“I love you. I’ve always, always loved you. You’ve never been a ‘father’ to me, but you’ve always been the most precious person to me, and the one I loved most of all...!”

“Ungh...” Having her so close and looking up at him, Dale once more realized how almost painfully beautiful Latina was. But even so, he withstood this first blow, then noticed Latina had turned pitifully red all the way to the tips of her ears.

Her teary eyes possessed more than enough impact to make a man's heart tremble, but they also reminded him of the sobbing girl back when she was young. He felt truly relieved to see that her actions still had some childishness left to them. It showed that there was still a grace period left before they would bare their hearts to one another. When the time came, he'd be ready for their relationship to change.

"Dale... I... I want to stay with you forever..."

"...Right. I promise. I'll stay with you until the day I die."

Having regained a bit of his composure, Dale gave Latina a kiss on the cheek, just like he had then.

†

"Split apart?" Vint said from under the bed, looking up at the pair as they hugged one another. Lacking Gregor's tact, the beast just kept on doing things as he pleased.

"I don't really get what you're saying, but I do know that it's pissing me off," Dale replied as he glared straight at Vint, even though he knew it was foolish to expect delicacy from an animal. The beast was so out of the ordinary that even though it was illogical, Dale wanted to think he could expect that, but apparently he couldn't. "Ah, right, Latina, be sure to have Rose give you a proper exam later. It may just be a light case, but I do have a magical element malfunction, so you could end up catching it."

The possibility was slim, but Latina was so precious to him that he couldn't help but worry.

"It's alright. I can't catch a magical element malfunction," Latina responded with a smile.

"Huh?" Dale questioned, dumbfounded.

"I can catch mild illnesses, but I can't catch the really danger-

ous ones that can be fatal, like magical element malfunctions,” Latina replied as if that were completely obvious.

“Why is that?” Dale had never heard this before. Latina looked confused by Dale’s reaction.

“Rag told me. Just like how ‘the power of demon lords doesn’t affect those who are protected by the gods,’ it also doesn’t affect ‘those who are protected by fate.’ He said, ‘Latina, you’re protected by fate, so you’ll be fine.’”

“I’ve never heard that.”

“Really?” Latina stared blankly, apparently finding what she’d said to be perfectly natural. Dale figured “those who were protected by the gods” likely referred to people with high-ranking divine protection, but he hadn’t the slightest idea what “those who were protected by fate” meant. Now that he thought about it, he felt like she’d said she was “protected by fate” before.

“Latina... what is the ‘fate’ that protects you...?”

It took a bit of time for her to answer.

“I don’t really know.”

Dale forced down his desire to press her further. If he let his emotions drive him and threw question after question at her before she could respond, she’d get scared and pull away. She was strangely stubborn, after all. If he made the wrong decision, she probably wouldn’t talk to him about this again.

“Latina... is that... a bad thing for you?”

“I don’t know...” Latina repeated, and then looked at Dale. Seeing how concerned he was, her expression grew a bit troubled. “Um... I really don’t know. That’s how things have been for me ever since I was born, and my parents treated it as completely natural, too... I didn’t know it was different for other people.”

“...I see.”

Now that she'd said that, Dale couldn't pursue the matter further. He understood because his own divine protection was similar. He knew that it was difficult to explain such a thing with words alone to someone who lacked it.

Dale switched topics to a different question, one he had asked before but still hadn't gotten an answer to. “Well then, Latina... Why are you here?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I asked Gregor to send a message to Kreuz after I arrived in the capital... That should've only been three days ago. It just doesn't add up.”

That was the reason Dale found it so strange that Latina was here. Dale knew how to ride a horse, and if he rode one while casting healing magic, he could push things and arrive in two days. Latina didn't know how to ride one, though, so she would have needed to ride in carriages, and even if she hit every connection perfectly, that would still take at least a week. No matter how Dale thought about it, it just didn't add up.

When Dale pointed that out, Latina's body stiffened.

Dale was familiar with that reaction, as well as the expression on her face. It was a reaction that was very easy to read, and he'd seen it since she'd started playing with friends who had gotten up to the sort of pranks and mischief fitting for their ages.

As Latina's heart would pound as she looked at him, Dale would think, *She's so easy to understand, it's adorable! What could she be planning?!* and then purposefully fall for the prank, just to see her reaction. She'd be on edge as she stared at him when she succeeded, looking pleased with her accomplishment, and it took everything he had to not break out in a smile. Those

really were happy memories.

Dale continued to question her, not letting his feelings as he reminisced show on his face. “Did you leave Kreuz without telling Kenneth?”

Latina shook her head in response. “No. I made sure to get his permission. He told me to make sure I was properly prepared if I was heading to the capital.”

As she kept talking, Dale broke out in a cold sweat.

“I tried to run right out as soon as I saw the message, but he got angry and said I shouldn’t...”

Even for an adoptive father and daughter, Dale and Latina really were strangely alike.

“Then Latina... what did you do?”

“Um, you see... Vint and I...” Latina’s gaze drifted about as she hesitated. Finally, she made up her mind and started to tell what had happened as if confessing.

“Woof,” the pup beside her responded, so calm it was almost refreshing.

†

The letter from the capital was short and sweet, but it also conveyed all the information it needed to, clearly noting that Dale’s illness wasn’t serious and that he was currently being treated by Rose and other high-ranking Niili priests.

And yet, Latina was still thrown into an absolute panic.

Sensing that she was ready to impulsively fly out of the Dancing Ocelot, Kenneth firmly restrained her. “Latina!”

“Let me go! I need to go to where Dale is!”

He put some strength into his grip as he grabbed her arm, and Latina wasn't able to escape by shaking and flailing about. Even so, she looked up at Kenneth with a firm glare. “Let me go!”

A dangerous light blazed in her grey eyes. Kenneth saw it, but quietly yet firmly replied, “You can't do that.”

Latina recoiled a bit. Kenneth had once led a party of adventurers, so his voice alone was enough to cause that.

“Latina... Trying to run off to the capital like that would be rash...”

Having lost her chance to jump into the conversation, Rita hugged Latina from behind, her face pale. Rita was pregnant, so Latina couldn't forcefully throw her off. Kenneth took his hand off her arm.

“But... but!” Latina's voice trembled as she powerlessly shook her head. Nevertheless, she kept looking up at Kenneth as if trying to persuade him.

Looking her straight in the eyes, Kenneth quietly stated, “If you're going to the capital, then you need to prepare properly first. You should know that traveling isn't so easy that you can just head out without readying your supplies and plotting your route.”

“Huh?”

“Kenneth?” Rita asked, also surprised by his words.

Paying no heed to their reactions, Kenneth looked over towards the regulars. “Sylvester, do you have any trustworthy acquaintances in the capital?”

“I might have a few.”

“In that case, go ahead and write letters of introduction for Latina. Is anyone here familiar with the highway to the capital?”

“Yeah. My clients are mostly around there.”

“I want to know about the latest trends on the highway and the names of inns that are safe for female travelers to stay.”

“In that case, wait till tonight. I’ll talk with some other guys and figure things out in detail.”

“I’m counting on you. And then...”

“K-Kenneth...” Latina spoke up, sounding flustered at having seen Kenneth briskly hand out instructions.

“What is it?”

“You’re not... going to stop me?”

“Do you want me to?”

“No. I want to go...”

“Then you’ve got to prepare properly. Go get your luggage and travel clothes together. I’ll look it all over later.”

“R-Right!”

After watching Latina go flying up the stairs towards her room, Rita came back to her senses and questioned her husband. “Kenneth, what are you doing?”

“With her like that, even if we force her to stop, she’ll just sneak out and head to the capital all on her own. If she’s going to be reckless regardless, then it’s better to make sure she prepares properly and does it as safely as possible.”

Kenneth had seen in Latina’s expression that she felt so cor-

nered that if Kenneth were to try to stop her, she'd blow past him in order to do what she felt she needed to. He thought that even if he were to somehow seemingly persuade her and talk her down, she'd go running off to the capital the second he took his eyes off of her. Despite appearances, Latina had been stubborn ever since she was little. Now that she'd made up her mind, there was no changing it.

There was a limit to how closely Kenneth could keep an eye on her. He could talk to the gatekeepers and tell them not to let her leave town, but he didn't want to let things go that far.

Kenneth looked over at Sylvester with a frown. "To be honest, I'd like to get a party of only women to escort Latina, but..." he muttered.

"Sure enough, that'd be difficult to manage on such short notice," Sylvester responded with an awkward expression on his face.

There were fewer female adventurers in general, and what's more, if the condition was a strictly women-only party, even someone as well-connected as Sylvester couldn't put one together so promptly.

"Rather than leaving Latina to some tactless men... it'd probably be better to leave things to Vint, right?" Kenneth said with some distaste, looking at the "pup" who had popped up to check out the commotion in the storefront.

"Woof?"

"Regardless of how old they may be, this is a time when it's hard to say if we can trust them," Sylvester added with a sigh.

As the job of adventurer was essentially removed from gentlemanly behavior, there was no guarantee that someone they hired wouldn't try to do something untoward to Latina under the guise

of comforting her when she was out of sorts worrying about Dale. It was impossible to deny the chance that her “guards” could be the most dangerous element in the whole equation.

“The road to the capital is carefully maintained, so I think Latina could manage on her own. I’d still be worried about her safety, though.”

“How skilled is the little lady as a magic user?”

“She’s apparently learned some proper attack magic. Her specialty has always been things like defensive wall and support magic. I’d say she’s capable of defending herself.”

With her delicate mana control, Latina was able to easily use magic that would normally be considered highly difficult, and though it had just been for a short time, she’d been taught by Rose, who was an exceptional magic user; the variety of magic Latina could use had greatly expanded.

“As long as she has time to chant, she should be able to manage.”

“Then... this ‘dog’ would be the safest bodyguard, huh?”

“Woof?” Sensing that he was now the topic of conversation, Vint tilted his head.

“Sylvester, how do tamers get the animals they’re using into town?”

For tamers, who primarily employed Center magic to utilize animals and magical beasts, their beasts were both their weapons and partners. One could call them their most important assets. It was only natural for tamers to take them through town and into lodgings and the like.

“I don’t really know the details myself. I think they have specialized magical devices. Hey, somebody call for Kevin,” Sylvester

said, sending off a young lad by his side to go fetch a tamer he knew.

“...Ugh, fine!” Rita had kept silent for a while, but she’d apparently made up her mind. She faced the Akhdar’s message board and started looking into the latest information from around the area.

Rita also knew how stubborn Latina was. She also knew that the girl would be able to force her way through if she had a mind to do so. Furthermore, Rita understood that if the girl was going to do something dangerous, it was better to help her out.

If Latina was being totally reckless and they tried their hardest to stop her, it was still possible they would fail. She was just too skilled, which was a problem in its own way.

By the time that Kevin, the tamer Sylvester had called for, arrived at the Dancing Ocelot, Rita had prepared maps all the way to the capital, and together with the regulars she was writing down all sorts of notes, making for a bundle of valuable information. Just getting ahold of maps to start with was difficult, and as their accuracy increased, the price and rarity grew in proportion. This just went to show the potential of the network of first-rate adventurers that made up the regulars, combined with the Ocelot’s position as an information terminal.

Kevin brought a black-furred wolf with him. He was known for usually bringing two wolves with him on jobs. The female wolf who was missing was the mate of the one he’d brought and had given birth for the first time this spring. She was currently rearing her cub, so Kevin was apparently taking time off of work. As a result, even though he’d been summoned out of the blue, he soon showed up at the Dancing Ocelot.

With the entrance of an unfamiliar beast into his territory, Vint glared at the black wolf from the shadows of the counter. The wolf acted as though he didn’t care, but his ears were moving

all about.

“This is the magical device,” Kevin said, pointing out a collar with a metallic plate hanging from it that was around the wolf’s neck. “To be blunt, animals instinctually hate this, so when one is wearing it, it’s proof that they’re either being controlled with Center magic or that they’ve been thoroughly trained. That’s the minimum requirement for an animal to be allowed into town.”

“So if Vint wears this, he could accompany Latina?” Kenneth asked, looking over a spare magical device Kevin had brought. He held it out towards Vint. After sniffing the device as it drew close to his face, Vint made a disgusted expression. Even though he was an animal, the look was quite clear.

“Yuck. Don’t like this.”

“You have to choose between Latina leaving you behind, or putting this on and going with her.”

“Put up with it. Can do,” Vint immediately replied, just as expected.

“I’d heard the rumors, but for a mythical beast to do that of his own will, without Center magic... Just how out of the norm is she?” Considering his occupation, Kevin was utterly perplexed by what he was seeing.

“It’s best not to think about it. We’re talking about the little lady, after all,” Sylvester replied, seeing off the man with a lukewarm gaze.

And like that, the preparations were hurriedly carried out.

Latina’s traveling gear was primarily what she’d once used for her trip to Tislow. The cape had become rather small for her, but on the plus side, it was an effective magical device, so she still ended up using it. The design wasn’t one where size mattered

much to start with, and she wouldn't have to worry about getting cold considering the season, so she decided it would still work fine. The passenger carriages that ran between towns were set up so that one could just stop in towns along the way and not have to camp outdoors. Adventurers never failed to have a cloak or overcoat on them, as they could use them to sleep on when camping, but she didn't need to prepare for all that.

“You had a staff for magic users, didn't you, Latina?”

“Yeah. But it's not really an issue for me to use magic without it.”

“That's true. But it also serves as a way to say, ‘I'm a magic user’ to the people around you. In form only, at least, it makes you look like an adventurer.”

“Do you mean I should take it because people don't take female travelers seriously?”

“That's the long and short of it.”

The rod that Dale had once bought for Latina was meant for children to practice with, but it was still more than good enough when compared to the sort of equipment used by adventurers who were just starting out.

To people with wicked intentions, frail women traveling on their own looked like nothing but prey. But when the woman was a magic user, it was a different story. She gave the impression of someone with a strength that couldn't be gauged based on their outer appearance. If a single staff alone was enough to give that effect, then it was definitely worth bringing.

After Kenneth, Rita, and the regulars finished helping her prepare, Latina left the Dancing Ocelot early the next morning.

“Take care. Seriously, be careful,” Rita said, looking con-

cerned. She had left Theo asleep back in their room.

“I know. I’ll be alright,” Latina responded. Rita’s expression made her feel guilty, but more than that, she felt truly grateful for being allowed to do what she was doing. “Thank you for letting me go.”

“Don’t make any bad choices. Keep your wits about you,” Kenneth said with a firm nod.

“Right,” Latina responded, bowing to the two of them again. “I’m off.”

With Vint walking by her side, his tail wagging calmly, Latina left the Dancing Ocelot behind her, feeling the couple’s gazes on her back.

As she was instructed, she headed towards the carriage stop, (there were no direct carriages to the capital, so she’d need to transfer on the way there), but she suddenly stopped halfway. Her eyes darted around as she confirmed that she could no longer see the people who saw her off. She then squatted down next to Vint.

“Hey, Vint...”

“Woof?”

“There’s something I want to try... but I want to keep it a secret from everyone else.”

“Woof?”

“Do you think I could ride you, Vint?”

When she was staying in Tislow, Master Cornelio had once lectured Latina about the capital, and she’d learned that the highway between it and Kreuz was purposefully set up to be an indirect route, with the intention to buy time to set up defenses in an

emergency. There was also the matter of the geography and the placement of bridges, so it was difficult to head straight to the capital from Kreuz or the port town of Qualle farther along the way. That was why it was overwhelmingly faster to take a flying dragon, which could go in a straight line, rather than taking the land route.

Knowing that, Latina wondered if she could rely on her friend to travel by air rather than taking carriages.

“I’ll use magical wall and gravity reduction magic together. I’ll do my best to not get in your way when you’re flying, so do you mind giving it a try?”

“Woof!”

Unfortunately, nobody was around to point out just how ridiculous and out of the ordinary it was to maintain multiple magics for a long period of time. Latina was trying something absolutely reckless that the adults around her hadn’t even considered, and perhaps most surprisingly of all, she had the ability to carry it out.

After leaving the town, the two practiced a few times at a low altitude, then took to the sky and started their trip.

She had done it.

Being just a cub, Vint wasn’t able to fly as quickly as a flying dragon, a magical beast specialized for the task. It was still difficult for him to fly for a long time, or over a long distance all at once. Latina also needed breaks from continually maintaining her magic.

Latina was plenty calm and knew all of that, so rather than letting her feelings rush her, she made sure she and Vint rested when they needed to. They stopped for a night at a town along the way and then arrived at the capital the following day.

Realizing that it was out of the ordinary to be riding a mythical beast, Latina wisely chose to have Vint land a ways from the capital rather than right next to it, and they walked the rest of the way. Because of that, the guards fortunately didn't take her for someone suspicious and mistakenly shoot her down.

Unlike Kreuz, which was a town fueled by travelers, it was difficult to gain entry through the gates surrounding the capital, but the abilities of the regulars of the Dancing Ocelot—who were amongst the foremost adventurers in Laband—were not to be taken lightly.

The letters of introduction that Sylvester had prepared for Latina were all addressed to people well known about the capital. Just Sylvester's signature alone, written in his strong, steady handwriting, was valuable. After all, he was a popular adventurer highly renowned for his exploits. It was hard to imagine from seeing him always drinking cheap booze, but he was just that famous of a man. The magical device attached to Vint was also a legitimate, high-quality good.

The girl's guardian was Dale Reki, who was also famous in the capital; she carried letters of introduction from the legendary adventurer, Sylvester Delius; and she was accompanied by a mythical beast. Nobody would blame the gatekeeper in charge at that time for feeling overwhelmed.

For better or worse, the people of Kreuz had grown used to how extraordinary Latina was. That couldn't be expected of people in the capital, though.

For that reason, the inspection during Latina's first time entering Ausblick was surprisingly light.

With the festive streets of the capital sprawled out before her, Latina was at a loss. "What do I do now...?"

"Woof?"

Thanks to the presence of her friend at her side, she wasn't crushed by anxiety.

Kenneth and the others had warned her in advance: even if she went to the capital, that didn't mean she was guaranteed to be able to see Dale. He was staying at the estate of Duke Eldstedt, who was an elite amongst elite even in the capital. Even if she was Dale's adopted daughter, Latina was ultimately still just a mere commoner. If she showed up uninvited, it would only be natural for her to get turned away at the gate.

The numerous letters of introduction Sylvester had prepared didn't change the fact that it would be difficult, but they at least made it a lot more likely than if Latina tried to make an appointment to visit the Duke's estate all on her own.

"What should I do...?" she muttered as she thought. Just then, she remembered that a particular someone was supposed to be staying in Ausblick. "Lady Rose is supposed to be in the capital right now... Should I try talking to her?"

"Woof?"

"Anybody should be able to enter the temple of Niili... and she may be able to act as an intermediary for me, right?"

"Woof!" Vint replied in agreement, which made Latina feel relieved, and her expression brightened a little. Since the temple of Niili also served as a clinic, anyone she asked around town should immediately be able to tell her where it was.

Having decided her next destination and with Vint by her side, Latina headed for a row of shops aimed towards travelers.

"And then, I got Rose to introduce me while she was out doing volunteer work for the temple."

Currently, Rose was in the care of the ducal Eldstedt family, so

she had no issue entering and leaving the estate without permission. She had also mingled with the people of the Eldstedt family since she was young, so in spite of their actual social statuses, she was in a position where she was allowed to make personal visits.

Accompanied by Rose, Latina had visited the duke's estate, and Rose introduced Latina to the duke himself, something the girl had never expected. She was truly glad that she had changed into her most formal dress at the temple, having figured it would be improper to visit the residence of an elite noble in her travel attire.

Recalling the etiquette Rose had taught her alongside magic in the attic of the Ocelot, Latina somehow managed to properly introduce herself to Duke Vladimir Rot Eldstedt. Seeing Rose's indigo-blue eyes look a little calmer, she sensed that she'd gotten a passing mark and felt relieved.

One of his servants had already reported to the duke that Rose had brought a troubled young girl accompanied by a mythical beast to his mansion, the very adopted daughter that Dale was always talking about and doting on. Even the grand chamberlain, who had served the estate for many years, had trouble deciding how to deal with this visitor for a moment. He figured he should at least give an immediate report to the duke, at which point the duke himself said he'd like to meet her, so Rose and Latina were immediately ushered into his presence.

The duke had accompanied Latina when she visited Dale's room as a mere bit of mischief. As a veteran of a world filled with plots and trickery, he would naturally have learned that even though Dale appeared to be recovering, he was at a peak state of agitation. So he'd just have a chuckle, as if to say, "Got you."

"And so, Lady Rose brought me here, but... Dale? What's wrong?"

"Just give me a second... I'm still trying to grasp the situa-

tion...”

Dale’s expression had stiffened as he listened to Latina’s story, until he ultimately ended up holding his head in his hands. The pup had played a bigger role than he’d expected.

Did this girl understand just how abnormal it was to manage to travel through the air without being a Center magic user or receiving any special training? Though with that said, she had been able to pull it off because she and Vint didn’t have a master/servant relationship; rather, they were friends and she was making a request, which was excessively unusual in and of itself. But after his long years of watching over Latina, Dale’s common sense about such things had grown numb.

When the duke asked about how Latina had gotten there, how should Dale explain? Up until now, there hadn’t been anyone who could personally travel through the sky. It wasn’t a matter that could be overlooked, both in terms of military defense and strategy.

However, it was hard to imagine anyone else using the same method. They’d need a soaring wolf to accept them enough that they could pet its stomach unconditionally. Yeah, it was impossible. They’d get their face bitten off before that, and that would be the end of things.

Latina stared at Dale with a slight tilt of her head as he nodded along. When their eyes met, she broke out in a joyous smile.

“...What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

Even as she said that, Latina’s happy expression didn’t change at all.

Thinking on it, Dale recalled one of her favorite sayings: “I’m

with you, after all.” She was always saying that with a happy smile.

“Well, I guess it’ll work out...” Dale muttered, feeling that his cheeks were a bit flushed.

He realized again that he was with the overly adorable Latina. Rather than worrying about what may happen, he was left wondering just what he should do.

Now that he’d come to understand both her feelings and his own, the rest of Dale’s recuperation period was used more for contemplation rather than focusing on healing.

Contemplating *How can this girl be so cute?! and the like.*

In terms of vocabulary alone, not much had changed. Comparing before and after, the main list of words he used had hardly shifted at all.

However, Dale had clearly started to see Latina in a different way than he used to. And thinking on it, he saw that it was unavoidable that the people around him had felt the need to rebuke him so thoroughly. It was only natural. In fact, it was obvious to do so. There was a limit to how dense someone could be. He wasn’t an idiot, right? Or was he?

Repeating such masochistic thoughts over and over, Dale recovered less than a week later. Having Latina by his side had caused him to get well quicker. It had just been a minor illness to start with, but his healing capability had been heightened noticeably thanks to her presence.

And during that time, Dale’s awareness of Latina changed day by day.

The second she sat at his bedside to talk to him, their eyes would meet, and she’d gently smile back at him.

When Dale would touch a lock of her hair, she'd pull back a bit. He'd come to realize it wasn't because she was rejecting her "father" due to puberty, but was a sign of shyness accompanied by a slight flush of her cheeks.

Occasionally, her gentle grey eyes would grow moist, and he'd see a heat in her gaze as she stared at him. Now that he understood her feelings, he could also understand the meaning behind that heat. He'd avert his gaze, feeling slightly embarrassed, and she'd let out a wistful sigh, only to then smile back at him once more as if nothing had happened. The "little Latina" box he'd placed her in had been doing more work than he'd thought. Now that he was aware of it and had removed his filter, he could see clearly that she was a maiden in love.

Though it was embarrassing, he reached out and stroked her hair like he used to. Ever since Latina was young, her hair was so smooth and glossy that it wouldn't lose out to any high-class silk. Originally it had started as him patting her on the head to say that she was a good girl, but it felt so good to the touch that it had become a habit of his. When he did it, Latina looked overjoyed. Seeing that defenseless expression born from trust, Dale unconsciously slipped his hand down to her cheek and glimpsed a hint of interest from her.

This girl was just too defenseless. It was almost shocking how much that was true around a man, like himself. Her guard was so far down, he got the feeling that if he tried to lay a hand on her, she'd just say, "Go ahead." Perhaps that could be chalked up to her childishness, but Dale had some thoughts on how dangerous that was.

If she wanted to, she could definitely drive men to tears...

Her innocent, defenseless actions served to work men up without her realizing it, so if she *did* understand and learned how to use it to her advantage, she could become a real femme fatale. The scary thing was the way the people around her seemed to

naturally grow devoted to her. He needed to make sure things stopped where they were: with her just having a fan club.

While he knew that she had no such intentions herself, he couldn't help but hold his head in his hands at the thought that he could make a move whenever.

It's still too soon. It's still too soon. I shouldn't think things like that, he'd repeat in his mind like a chant, making a variety of faces all the while. But Latina just innocently smiled at him.

Latina was still young. He got a faint sense that her build was starting to round out, but... he was surely imagining things. She still had a childish physique; she was developing slower than her friends and was worried about that.

Between the "rebellious phase" incident, the way Latina had distanced herself, and Dale running away under the guise of work, he hadn't properly seen Latina for over a month. But even so, there was no way she'd change so much in that short a time.

Having no idea that Dale was desperately trying to persuade himself of that, Latina just smiled back at him. Dale, meanwhile, had no way of knowing at this point that she really had entered her growth period, as she'd claimed for some time now.

She was like a butterfly about to emerge from its cocoon and was truly growing into an adult surprisingly fast. Her mother's genes that she'd been so worried about turned out to not have much of an effect, and over the months and years, she'd become very charming, causing Dale a great deal of worry.

That time wasn't too far off.

†

It was a strange space. And yet, she didn't find it unusual to be here.

It was a monochrome gathering of light in all the colors, and the space was constructed of that alone. There wasn't a single color there, and yet every one of them was contained within this monotone world. Surveying the space, it seemed absurdly vast, yet also like it was contained within a miniature garden. She was also aware of why the things that existed in this space did so.

Spaced out equally in a circle were chairs. The shapes and sizes all varied, yet she knew that they had something in common:

These were all thrones.

Each of the seven had a master who should be seated in them. She was unable to see them, but she could strongly and clearly sense the presence of a master about each throne.

She looked them over, one after another. In front of one throne was a blood-stained blade, while another had a jug overflowing with water. She saw a throne with dead branches coiled around it, and one in which a thick book was enshrined. She surveyed the thrones in turn in this way, then stopped in front of the first one.

There, and there alone, a master didn't exist.

She was also aware that this throne would welcome a master soon. Furthermore, she knew that she was here because she had met the qualifications. This was the choice that she had abhorred most of all. It was the reason she had once lost everything and a choice that would betray the feelings she still wanted to protect.

And so, she gave a small shake of her head and refused it, whispering, "I don't need it."

"This isn't what I want."

What she wanted, what she sought, was—

“What’s wrong, Latina?”

Hearing a kind voice, she awoke. After blinking her eyes, she remembered that she was in the safest feeling place in the world.

The room overflowed with warmth. She’d had countless precious memories here, and her most beloved person of all was here, too.

“Did you have a nightmare or something?”

Ever since she was little, he’d say such kind words and gently stroke her hair. The warmth of his palm would clear away any scary memories or nightmares.

It made her happy when he stroked her hair, and she was overjoyed when he said it was beautiful, so she grew unable to cut it. He surely didn’t realize it himself, but his nonchalant words and actions were all incredibly precious to her.

“I’m alright.”

There was nothing that scared her. As long as she was here, with his warmth by her side, nothing scary would happen. This was the safest place in the world, after all.

“I’m fine now.”

She gave a joyous smile, snuggled her cheek up to his warmth like a kitten, then fell into a cozy slumber.

She didn’t want to think about it.

Someday, she’d lose this warmth.

It was the only thing she wanted. The sole thing that she desired. He was by her side, and they shared an almost overflowing happiness.

However, she'd surely lose that someday. And when that time came, what should she do?

So she wouldn't think about it, she let herself drift off into a deep sleep.

Interlude: The Platinum-haired Maiden Does This and That at the Duke's Estate

While staying at the Eldstedt manor in the capital, her days were busy in their own way, filled with activities like reading through the family's books or rigorously having manners drilled into her again by Rose. Rose did it out of consideration for Latina so nothing embarrassing would happen, as she'd come to the estate as a member of Dale's family. Dale had thought that her manners were already more than good enough for a city girl, but he was still earnestly grateful for Rose's concern.

However, Dale thought that she didn't need to know how to handle herself at a ball.

The duke had requested that he attend the ball he was holding at his own manor alongside Latina.

"Latina doesn't have any outfits appropriate for a ball."

"It's just a personal event for close friends and family. There's no need to be so formal."

There's no way that's the case, Dale thought, but he didn't let it show on the surface, since he'd been thoroughly trained in the ways of high society.

This was the highest-ranking noble in Laband. No matter how much of a "small-scale," personal event it was, it would be like a whole different world that a mere commoner couldn't possibly imagine.

"If her outfit is the issue, you have my permission to borrow

one from my house.”

The maids all brightened when they heard those words from the duke, knowing nothing of the quip of *I don't need that permission* that Dale held back inside.

Dale learned why the maids were so happy when he grumbled about the matter to Gregor shortly afterwards.

“It’s because my sister left many outfits behind at the manor. They may not quite meet the current trends anymore, but they could be adjusted.”

“Are you trying to make an enemy of me, too?!”

“For Latina, I think that something with a classic silhouette to it would be more fitting than the current trend of dresses that show off skin. I would imagine that those were my lord uncle’s intentions, yes?”

“You too, Rose?!”

Rose, who had referred to Vladimir in such an informal manner because they were in private, broke out in a gentle smile.

Latina wasn’t a noble to start with, so she obviously hadn’t had an official debut as a lady of the court; she’d normally never be able to appear at such a gathering of adults like a ball. Therefore, she was granted permission precisely because it was a “private, informal” event.

“Dale, you called for me?” asked Latina, poking her head in and holding a book in her arms.

“L-Latina?!” Dale questioned hysterically, causing her to blink her big eyes in surprise.

“Did you not call for me...?”

“Perfect timing, Latina. Since you are here, how about trying some on? That is alright, is it not, Sir Gregor?”

“Yeah. I don’t mind.”

“You guys... You’re conspiring against me...” Dale’s gaze remained fixed on Gregor and Rose, while the Eldstedt family maids surrounded Latina.

“Huh? What? Huh?”

“This reminds me of when Lady Rose was little.” The head maid smiled and brought Latina into the adjoining room. Latina, meanwhile, was left perplexed, not understanding what was happening to her.

“Lady Fanya doted on me often.”

“It’s because my elder sister was fond of you.”

Dale found it hard to interject as the childhood friends reminisced about old times. And yet, Rose pointed a smile his way.

“Unlike myself, it seems like any color clothes would suit Latina, yes? I cannot help but feel jealous.”

“Is that so?”

“My hair color stands out so much, there are some colors that just do not go with it.”

Dale gave a nod in understanding. It was true that Latina looked good in anything. Well, she did have a rather flat physique, so he couldn’t quite say that clothes with more mature designs exactly suited her, but she was still just so heart-warming to watch. Still, exposing too much skin would make it more likely for her to catch a cold, so that was no good. It was said that chills were a woman’s greatest enemy, so there was no reason to show her belly or wear a short skirt. A low neckline would be even

worse. But, well, putting that aside, it was fine to say she looked good in anything.

“Why do you hate showing her off so much?”

“Ugh... That’s... She’s my family, so... she’d get unnecessary attention just because of that.”

He was a young adventurer with the rare abilities of a “hero” and the deep trust of Duke Eldstedt. That was how high society viewed Dale. He wasn’t a noble of Laband, but he came from Tislow, a unique village with a culture all its own. His standing differed from that of a simple commoner.

Dale had been doing his job long enough that he could easily brush off the curious gazes and malicious rumors directed at him. However, he didn’t want to expose the kindhearted Latina to noble society, which certainly wasn’t all roses.

“On top of that, she’s just too adorable a girl. You just know that if some stupid young noble was to make a pass at her, there’d be rumors flying around about whether or not there was something between them.”

“Well, that is certainly true...”

“And of course, Latina will be cuter than anyone else at the ball. There’s no need to go out of my way to confirm something so obvious.”

“You certainly never waver, do you?” Gregor said, looking at him in astonishment, but Dale didn’t pay him any mind.

He certainly did wish to see Latina wearing the sort of flashy attire fitting for a ball, which she wouldn’t wear in her everyday life. Latina was already plenty cute, but she’d obviously become even more amazingly adorable. Everybody wouldn’t be able to help but stare. That much was a done deal. There was no need to

second-guess there.

But even so... No, rather because of that, he couldn't let Latina attend the ball. To Dale, all other men were enemies. He didn't want to go out of his way to create an opportunity for such meddlesome vermin to approach Latina.

"I don't need to give those pests a chance to get near Latina," Dale said while giving off a pitch-black aura.

"Sir Dale," Rose said, staring straight at him while tilting her head a bit.

"Hmm?"

"Is this the possessive side of gentlemen that I have heard so much about?"

If this had been the Dale of just a short while ago, he would have just laughed and denied it. He would have just declared that his feelings were his as Latina's guardian and because she was just too cute and that there was nothing further to it.

But as he was now, Dale couldn't so clearly deny his feelings.

Dale had said that he'd never thought of Latina as a member of the opposite sex, but he had still shown nothing but unease at Latina being together with other men. But were those really just his feelings as a guardian? Thinking back on it logically, he wasn't able to firmly deny that he'd displayed his most childish of emotions to such a degree that it made his eyes spin a bit.

Not wanting anyone to steal her away was a natural desire for a father, but for someone who wasn't her father, those feelings held a different meaning.

Now that he was aware of that, he was unable to hide how shaken he was by Rose's words.

“Huh? H-Huh? Y-You’re... not wrong? No, that’s...”

“Calm down a bit.”

Seeing Dale work his own emotions more and more into a flutter, Gregor sighed and Rose laughed pleasantly.

It was then that the door to the adjoining room opened. Dale instinctually turned his gaze toward it, and then froze.

There was Latina.

She had on a deep wine-red dress, with a simple design to the upper half. In comparison, the skirt was gathered enough that the hem swayed gorgeously just from Latina walking.

“Does it look weird...? It doesn’t quite feel right, somehow.” Latina looked embarrassed, having been suddenly forced into such an extravagant outfit. However, she still happily swayed and seemed to be enjoying the way the hem fluttered about.

“The color of your hair has a muted tone to it, so I tried pairing it with a bold color,” explained the head maid, who was standing behind Latina.

“From what I hear, you normally like to wear light tones, but you look even better in dark colors,” Rose added with a smile.

Listening to the women talking from afar, Dale’s mouth flapped open and closed. He knew there was something he needed to say, but he couldn’t think of anything.

“It made for quite a spectacle whenever my sister came home,” Gregor said, trying to help out his rather pathetic-looking friend.

“When Lady Rose was young, Lady Fanya would often have her try on her old clothes,” the head maid added.

Rose had been quite adorable when she was young, and Gre-

gor's sister Fanya had been rather fond of her. She personally taught etiquette to Rose, a lower-ranking noble, and had her wear extravagant outfits of a sort that would normally never be seen in the Cornelius household. Gregor had often seen the young Rose surrounded by a swarm of maids and made to change into one outfit after another.

The maids who had served in the manor for a long time remembered such happy scenes well. The exhilarated atmosphere that had resulted from Vladimir's words were a result of that, too.

"It suits you well." Gregor was usually a man of few words, but he offered that compliment to Latina in order to snap Dale back to his senses.

"Latina..."

"What is it?" Latina asked, tilting her head a bit as she looked at Dale, her expression showing both hints of worry and anticipation. Rather than praise from a number of other people, what she wanted was a single "You look cute" from one person in particular. She had on the sort of gorgeous dress she'd only seen in fairy tales and felt like a princess out of a picture book, so it was only natural that she'd want to hear the sort of words that would make her cheeks turn rosy.

And yet...

"...Did you pad your chest?"

Unsurprisingly, that made Latina seriously angry.



By the way, the dress Latina was currently borrowing was from when Fanya was a few years younger than Latina was now, and yet there was still room in the chest area, which depressed Latina a bit. Design-wise, it would have looked bad if it were baggy in that area, so she decided she had no choice but to stuff it some.

Even if Dale had realized it, it wasn't the sort of thing he should have pointed out.

"You were the one at fault just now."

"I cannot help but sympathize with Latina."

"Even I know I was in the wrong there..."

With tears in her eyes and shoulders squared in anger, Latina left the room, causing Dale to collapse slovenly on the table and wring out those words in a pathetic voice.

†

"D-Dale, you d-dummy!"

"Woof?"

"Y-You dummy..." Latina, in tears, clung to Vint.

While staying at the Eldstedt manor, Vint had primarily spent his days strolling about the yard and doing his own thing. The grounds were vast, which was fitting for the estate of a grand noble and made it an ideal place for the pup to play around.

When he followed his instincts and amused himself by digging holes in the central park of Kreuz, Dale and Latina would get mad at him; but here, nobody seemed to mind no matter how many holes he dug in the yard.

Dale couldn't be firm with Vint right now because he owed the pup for bringing Latina here safely, so he decided to settle things by earnestly apologizing to the ducal family later. That was no concern of Vint's, though.

Thanks to his work making an especially massive hole over the last few days, Vint had become coated in dirt, and he tilted his head as Latina sobbed pathetically in front of him. She had come running to the soaring wolf after changing back into her usual outfit. She didn't know anyone else here, so the one she could let her guard down around after Dale was Vint. When it came to complaining about Dale, the pup was her only option.

A commoner like Latina couldn't do something so bold as running to a dirt-coated Vint while wearing such a gorgeous dress. That was why she'd changed into her everyday dress, which wasn't formal wear or fitting for a guest at the duke's estate.

“Y-You dummy...”

Vint licked Latina's cheek to wipe away her tears, and she then pushed herself up against his grey fur, hugging him tight. Her skirt got covered in dirt, but she didn't care at the moment.

Latina wasn't skilled at badmouthing others, so, when she was disparaging someone else, her words had a lack of variation you wouldn't expect from someone raised in a bar in the rough part of town. A childish-sounding “Dummy” was the best that she could manage, and she'd always stammer when she said it. It was charming enough that rather than making the person she said it to feel bad, it would make them grin instead.

While spouting such unusual disparaging remarks, she hugged Vint and sighed.

Latina had naturally been excited at the sight of so many dresses more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen before. When she slipped her arms through the sleeves of a gorgeous

dress the color of a dark-red ruby, then saw herself reflected in a large mirror, she felt just a little confident in herself. When the maids around her praised her, saying how much it suited her, her reflection in the mirror started to look a little embarrassed.

Latina *was* capable of gauging how attractive someone was. She thought Rose was beautiful and understood that Gregor would be considered more attractive than Dale. However, she didn't think of that as a crucial criterion for evaluating people.

This had an influence on her low self-image, as she didn't have any confidence in her own looks but took care with her personal grooming anyway, and she thought she had a respectable enough appearance as a result. From the point of view of others, that evaluation may have seemed plenty ridiculous, but it was something similar to how girls her age treated a single pimple like the end of the world. Rather than thinking positively, Latina instead focused on her shortcomings, but that may have made her a perfectly normal girl.

And so, her reflection in the mirror overpowered some of that negativity.

She was absolutely ecstatic that Dale had promised to stay with her forever. She was so overjoyed and felt like she had to try even harder so Dale would acknowledge her as a full-grown woman. She thought she could push herself further, but if he could say a few more of those sorts of special words, it would give her a *massive* push.

She was at fault for letting herself get so greedy and failing to hold back such thoughts. Dale didn't do anything wrong. That was what Latina thought in the depths of her heart. But still, those words he'd uttered were just too much.

"Dale, you d-dummy..."

"Woof," Vint replied to Latina's continued pathetic-sounding

wailing, looking troubled. You couldn't win against someone who didn't listen to reason. This world was overflowing with such absurdity.

Not wanting to return to the manor with her now-bloodshot eyes, Latina instead joined Vint on a walk around the grounds. The estate sat on a vast amount of land, so it required some time to go around it all, making this a good opportunity to get away for a bit. Vint had become intimately familiar with the garden, so he was able to show Latina around and led her to where the flowers were in full bloom. By taking in the beauty of the garden, Latina regained her composure bit by bit.

"They're lovely, aren't they?"

"Woof?" Vint didn't understand the idea of admiring flowers that you couldn't eat, or the meaning of purposefully planting greenery with strange shapes. But it made Latina happy, and that was enough for him.

"I wonder if I could take a few flowers..." She brought her face in close to a large blossom and smiled, enjoying the scent. She wouldn't pick flowers without permission, but she'd be sure to ask if it was alright later on. "We could make a really big floral wreath with this many flowers, couldn't we?"

"Woof."

She'd probably be able to make a ring of flowers big enough to wear like a crown. Thinking about such things raised her spirits a bit. She decided to stop feeling depressed and regretful and gave a firm nod, clenching her hands into tight fists.

"I'll definitely grow big and knock the words right out of Dale!"

That wasn't the sort of thing a girl her age should be shouting loudly outside.

When Dale firmly declined repeated requests to attend the ball using the fact/excuse that he was still resting, Duke Vladimir gave up more easily than he had expected.

Dale hadn't expected the suggestion that was offered instead, leaving him dumbfounded.

“A-A painting... of Latina?”

He knew that portrait painters came and went from the duke's estate. In noble society, it was only natural to have an artist or two under your patronage. It wouldn't be strange to have an especially talented painter stay in your manor for your exclusive use. And yet, Dale couldn't see the point of having a portrait painted of a commoner, like Latina.

The duke couldn't possibly be plotting to market Latina to some young idiot noble, right? Latina would be able to marry into a high-ranking family, like the heroine from some fairy tale. He'd likely said it out of kindness, thinking that would make her happy, right? Even if he was the duke, he was still butting in where it was none of his business. There was seriously no need for such consideration. And most importantly, Latina was going to stay by Dale's side from now on. As if he'd let her go off with some other man.

A dark aura surrounded Dale as his thoughts flowed; however, he skillfully maintained a polite expression and manners.

Vladimir watched Dale with amusement and smiled gently. “One of the painters that my house employs saw your beloved daughter out in the garden. He asked me if it would be possible to paint her.”

“I have no reason to decline such a request directly from you, my lord,” Dale responded, hiding how shaken he was and

smoothly ignoring the fact that he had just denied a request from the duke.

In a practiced manner, the servant by Vladimir's side gave Dale a supplemental explanation. Apparently, the painter had heard that there was a live mythical beast at the manor, which one could normally never see even if they wanted to, and had hurried there. At the Dancing Ocelot, Vint was just seen as an unusual dog who helped watch the toddler and took naps wherever he pleased, but the opinion of society at large was different.

The painter then laid eyes on the even more unusual girl, whom the mythical beast followed after and obeyed. It was a whimsical sight, like something from an epic that had been passed down through the ages. The mythical beast was covered in dirt, and the girl's dress had become filthy as well, but the sight had stirred up the painter's creative urges so much that he didn't even notice.

According to what Dale heard later, being a portrait painter in the service of nobles was quite the stressful job. Just painting things as one saw them was not necessarily enough to please one's patron. It was apparently common to twist the truth of the matter and glorify things, and it seemed the impulse for an opportunity to freely draw what one truly wanted had landed on Latina this time around.

So there wouldn't be an unpleasant smell lingering about, Latina made sure to give Vint a thorough scrubbing. He wasn't pleased at being washed with strong-scented soap, but Latina carefully brushed him afterward, so his mood more or less recovered.

Latina picked out a simple yet still high-class dress to wear from the ducal family's collection of outfits. At first, she was nervous about the idea of being a model, but she had been told she just needed to act natural and that she would be fine as long as she didn't move around too much.

Now she was just having a carefree conversation with Vint while weaving the flowers she had gotten together into a circle. The painter was used to dealing with nobles, who were frequent complainers, so he had grown accustomed to not needing to make a model sit still for a long time.

His charcoal moved quickly, adapting to the various shifts in Latina's facial expression from moment to moment. Dale had serious doubts about someone who could finish drawing a practice piece so quickly.

What ended up on the paper was undoubtedly Latina. However, because it passed through the lens of someone else's point of view, there were bits drawn that clearly differed from the way Dale saw her.

Dale thought that he had looked at her more than anyone else. That he knew her more than anyone else, too. But that was through his own point of view, which was neither right nor wrong.

He didn't completely understand Latina. Acknowledging that, he realized he'd have to try harder to know her more properly as a woman. That was what the path he'd chosen required.

The painting was completed several days later. It showed a winged mythical beast protecting a beautiful girl adorned with a crown of flowers, and seemed like it had been drawn as a personification of her nickname. There was a hint of womanliness to the figure displayed on the high-class silk. The elegant smile on her face couldn't be called childish at all.

Dale realized that he had been desperately trying to ignore the fact that Latina was becoming an adult. It had been so deeply rooted in him that he hadn't even realized it.

While telling himself that there was no need to rush, that there was still time, a faint blush appeared on Dale's cheeks as he

looked upon this image of the girl so dear to him, as seen through someone else's eyes.

†

“Latina... do you want to attend a ball?”

“Huh?”

Dale and Latina were in a room together the night of the ball at the Eldstedt manner. Latina tilted her head in response to Dale's question, which he had asked because he was feeling a bit guilty.

“Um... I do have an interest in them. You said you attend them often as part of your work, and that they're boring, but... it's the sort of thing I've only ever seen in picture books. I've wondered what it would be like.”

“I see...”

Those sorts of feelings were only natural for a girl her age. Rather than making himself look narrow-minded, Dale should have been prepared to back her up no matter what may happen. Having reconsidered the matter from that perspective, Dale looked at Latina with a gentle smile.

He was shocked a bit when their eyes met and her expression melted into an adorable, childish one. He felt relieved that he could still see that youthfulness in her and think, *She's so cute!* as usual. While contemplating his own feelings, he hugged Latina in his arms.

“Well... it's definitely not the sort of dazzling and wonderful world you're imagining. After all, it's a place where evil spirits try to outfox each other.”

“...I don't like ghosts.”

“You are bad with them, aren’t you.”

Even if she knew it was just a metaphor, Latina absolutely couldn’t stand undead monsters, so she frowned in response.

“Also, you don’t know how to dance, right, Latina? If you see other people doing it in front of you, you’ll want to do it too, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then... that’ll be your homework to do before the next chance comes up.”

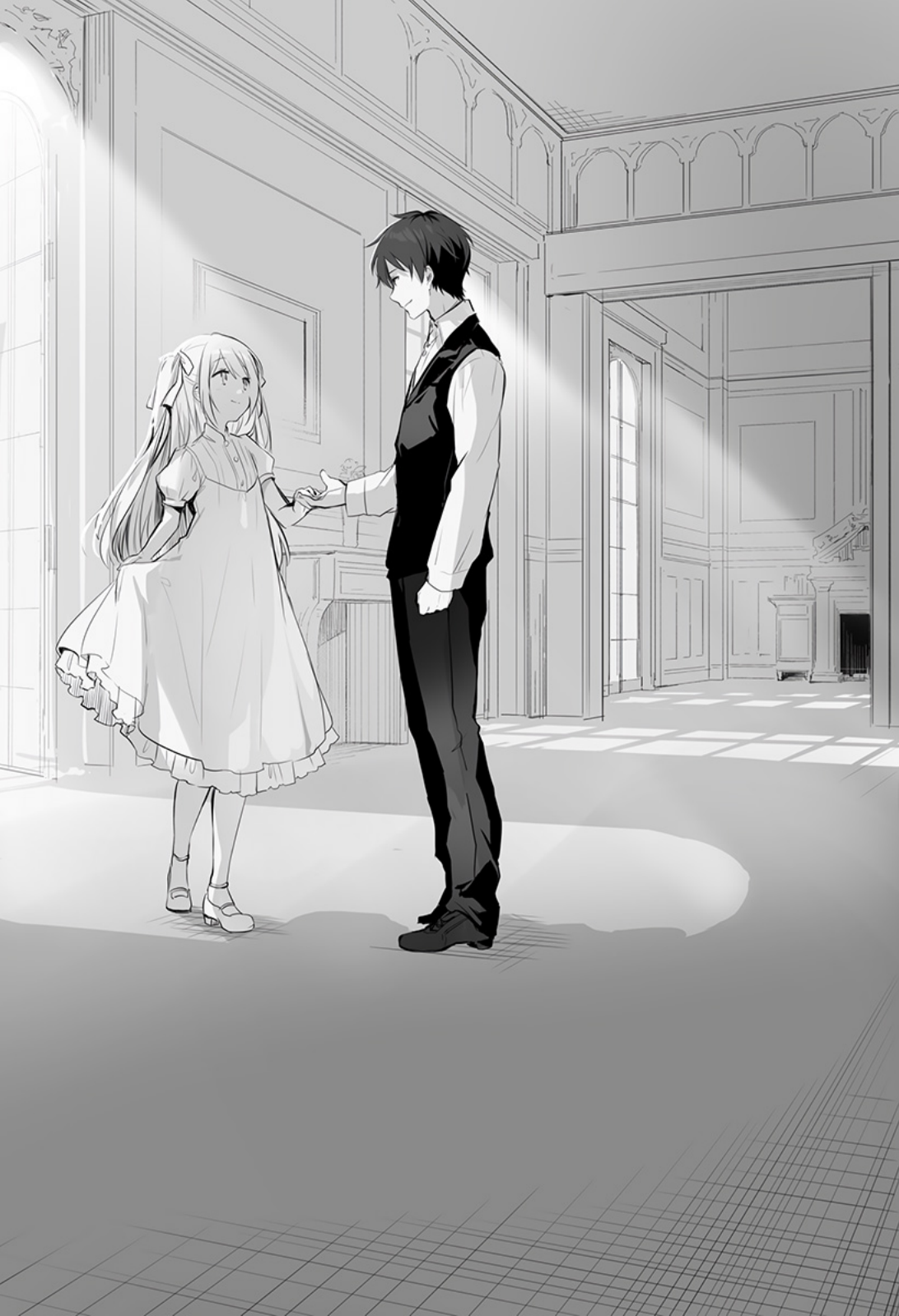
Latina had an exceptionally poor sense of rhythm, so that would certainly be quite the task. She knew that too, so she averted her eyes somewhat awkwardly.

The faint sound of a melody being played by the far-off orchestra drifted through the open window. When he heard it, Dale grinned at Latina, who was still in his arms. “Do you want to get started practicing right away?”

Understanding what he meant, Latina smiled back, her cheeks now rosy. “Yeah.”

Latina placed her hand atop the one Dale held out for her, then grasped the tip of her skirt and curtsied like a proper lady. Thanks to the training she’d received from Rose, there wasn’t even a hint that she’d learned it so hastily.

It might not be so far in the future that Dale took her to a proper ball, and when that time came, perhaps she’d be accompanying him as someone other than his “beloved daughter.”



Doing this mock dance while held in Dale's arms, Latina spun around, causing the hem of her skirt to flutter about. This time, Dale didn't speak ambiguously; he clearly told her, "Latina, you're the cutest girl in the world to me."

With her brilliant smile, Latina herself was like a flower in bloom.

4: The Young Man's Decision and Their Changing Relationship

How many times had she come to this place now, she wondered. This world made of monochrome light in all colors.

She stood before the only vacant throne. Ever since she made her “decision,” she had visited over and over again. That wish she'd held in the depths of her heart ever since she was young, that wish she thought would never be granted... When that was accepted, she had made up her mind.

And that had been precisely the requirement. Suddenly, the “first throne” in front of her was filled with a presence. The master of the only throne lacking one had been decided.

It was said that when one looked up at the heavens and saw a multitude of rainbows, it told of the birth of a new king into the world.

She knew that clear presence well. And so, she faced it and whispered, “Congratulations... on being crowned our new king.”

She felt like she heard a reply, and there was no way that she would mishear this person's voice.

“Oh new king, with your name of gold... I'm truly glad that you were chosen, just as predicted. And that I wasn't...”

Upon hearing the response that followed, she quietly shook her head. “No, I really am glad. I'm fine. You were the one who should become king. And so...” she whispered, looking at the new throne that had appeared in the center of the seven others.

“I won’t seek the power of this throne... so I’ll be fine,” she muttered, standing before the throne, which existed outside of the natural order and should be numbered zero, or perhaps eight.

†

“What’s up, Latina? You were spacing out,” Dale asked.

“Hmm?” Latina blinked a few times, then tilted her head a bit. “...I don’t know.”

“You’ve been spacing out like that a lot lately. Are you feeling bad or something?”

“No, not at all. I really am fine.” She shook her head back and forth in a way that was reminiscent of when she was young. However, as she smiled back at Dale afterwards, there was hardly any “childishness” left on her face.

Dale sensed a glimpse of something in her smile that worried him, and decided to keep an eye out to make sure it didn’t turn out to be something serious.

“I see.” He grasped her hand, trying only to say that he was always her ally.

It was then that Dale suddenly realized there was something strange going on in the sky. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one to notice, as a stir could be heard from outside the window.

“Rainbows...?”

It was an unusual sight.

The sky was covered in rainbows. There wasn’t just one, but a multitude coming down from different angles and coating the entire sky. Dale had seen rainbows before, but this was his first time seeing the sky like this.

“Rainbows cross the sky when the gods are looking down upon us...”

“Right. Is that a saying amongst the devils, too?”

“Yeah. I was told that there was a rainbow in the sky when I was born, too. Rag often said that I was born being protected by the gods.”

“I see.”

Rainbows were known as fragments of the majesty of the Gods of the Seven Colors, and as rainbows contained all of the colors those gods governed over, it was said that when one stretched across the sky, the gods were intervening somewhere in the world.

Apparently, there had been a rainbow in the sky when Dale was born, too. It was said that it wasn't at all uncommon for such a thing to occur when it came to those with high-ranking divine protection. But even so, Dale never heard of this many rainbows appearing.

Outside the window, he could see the especially devout bowing down in prayer or trembling in fear. Half-unconsciously, Dale embraced Latina, who was by his side, and she snuggled her head up against his shoulder.

“*****, ****,” she whispered, muttering words Dale didn't recognize.

“Latina?”

“A king... A new king has been born,” she responded, her grey eyes clouded over like they often did lately when she was drifting off.

“Huh?”

“That’s what this denotes...”

“Latina!” he shouted firmly, and grasped her shoulders.

Seeing her act so clearly off stirred up an unspeakable concern inside him. He felt like he needed to call her back to her senses right away.

“Wha...?” She gave a big blink of her eyes and then looked at Dale, seeming like she’d been startled by his loud voice.

He felt relieved from the depths of his heart to see her looking like her normal self once more. “Are you alright, Latina?”

“What? What is it, Dale? You surprised me...”

“I’m the one who was surprised. Seriously... why were you spacing out like that?”

Latina tilted her head in response.

Swallowing down the concern Latina’s reaction was evoking, Dale tried asking her in a calm voice, “What ‘king’ did you mean?”

“Huh? These rainbows indicate that a new demon lord has appeared,” Latina responded, as if it was obvious.

Dale knit his brows. “Do the devils have a legend like that?”

“I don’t know...” Latina responded, tilting her head again. “It... wasn’t Rag... Was it Mov...? Who told me that... It wasn’t you, right, Dale?”

“I’ve never heard that before.”

“I see... Just who told me, then...?”

Latina pondered the matter as she stared up at the sky by Dale’s side, but she never figured out the answer.

When the sixth month next arrived, Latina would turn sixteen.

Over a year and a half had passed since Dale had come to see Latina as a member of the opposite sex, but a strange distance had been maintained between them. It was as if their relationship had changed, but also as if it hadn't.

Dale had recognized Latina as a special woman to him, but at the same time, he still thought of her as a young girl. He could clearly see that she had been growing, but at the same time, he couldn't bring himself to make a move so soon. He got the feeling that that would somehow make him a failure as a person. As a result, he'd chosen to use whatever excuses he could to maintain the status quo.

Latina herself hadn't said anything that made it sound like she wanted such a thing, either. She simply believed in Dale's words and smiled gently back at him. Thinking about it, it wouldn't be incorrect to say that Dale had been thoroughly spoiled by the younger girl.

However, it wasn't exactly as if Dale had a ton of leeway. When she started puberty, Latina had said that her development was behind compared to other girls her age. Apparently, that turned out to be the truth. She hadn't grown all that much taller, but other parts of her had gotten rather large. Apparently her mother's genes, which had worried her so greatly, hadn't had that much of an effect after all. Perhaps she'd gotten her curves from her father's side.

Latina got quite a bit of exercise while running around at work, so her arms and legs weren't so thin that they looked like they could easily snap. They had also grown long and slender. Thanks to all that exercise, her waist was rather thin too, giving her rather enchanting, womanly curves.

To put it bluntly, she'd grown up to have quite the nice figure. Her face still looked a bit childish, but that was likely due to the innocent expression she always wore. Sometimes, when she was lost in thought, Latina's appearance was enough to shock even an older man like Dale. It would only be natural to call her "beautiful" or "pretty."

In fact, now that she'd grown, it was hard to imagine calling her anything *but* a beauty. And yet she was still as unguarded as she ever was, and Dale still pampered her. Looking totally at ease, she'd snuggle up to Dale like a kitten and happily gaze up at him.

It was powerful enough to make Dale try to distract himself from the moment, and he wondered just how much of a seductress she'd be if she were doing it intentionally. It's not exactly as if Dale was a saint. With such a beautiful girl who adored him so close, there was no way he wouldn't feel something.

Realizing that it was all his fault for not making things clear, Dale spent his days in this sort of occasional anguish.

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"If he's never going to get intimate with you, then you should get together with me."

"I'm fine with Dale. He said he'd wait till I'm an adult, so we're just waiting for now."

"I'd be ready to go for it right away."

"I'm fine with Dale!"

Over the past year and a half, this sort of exchange between Latina and Rudolph had become a normal sight in the Dancing Ocelot.

He had declared that he wouldn't give up on Latina, and just

as he'd claimed, he hadn't stopped his daily visits to the shop. Immediately after his confession, things were awkward between the two of them, but it didn't take too long for Rudolph to shake that off and start begging Latina every day, only for her to bluntly turn him down.

For the time being, Rudolph had been harshly ridiculed by the frightening old men who made up the regulars. But he didn't let that discourage him, and since Latina hadn't clearly stopped talking to him, the old men's attitudes had gradually softened.

Rudolph had taken the initiative because he was aware of the group swarming around Latina. Part of the reason was because he wanted to show her that he hadn't given up on her. But if that were all, then there was no need to keep doing that in front of everyone. Rudolph made sure to have such exchanges in the Ocelot, which made them the center of attention, in order to keep the other men aiming for her in check.

The people around him assessed Rudolph as a young guardsman who had potential and was doted on by his superiors. They couldn't help but wonder if they could get close to Latina despite her stating that she loved Dale more than anyone else, like Rudy had. The flood of confessions Latina's guardians had feared was being more or less held in check because Rudolph had been able to secure his current position.

He'd tried hard.

"By the way, Latina..." Rudolph called out to the girl while sipping some liquor, having grown accustomed to alcohol other than sweet ciders in the past year.

"What is it?"

"There are some traveling devils in town right now."

"Huh?" Latina tilted her head in response. "I'm surprised you

could tell they were devils. I've never really heard of devils walking around human towns with their horns showing..."

Including their country of Vassilios, devils were known to have an insular society and didn't interact much with other races. They also made up more of the demons that served demon lords than the other races, so it wasn't rare for other races to see them as a threat. Because of that, many devils hid their horns when visiting the lands of other races, wanting to avoid unnecessary trouble. The only clear visual difference between them and humans, the race with the highest population, was their horns. So those circumstances were also part of the reason why devils were rarely ever seen elsewhere.

"No, their horns were hidden. All three of them wore southern-styled hats."

"Then how did you know?"

"They reacted to this," Rudolph responded, pointing to the black shard dangling from his neck. "They knew that this was a horn."

What Rudolph had pointed to had been Latina's horn, which she had once broken off herself. At a glance, it looked like a precious black stone, but Latina herself had recognized it as hers.

"My horn?"

"They had a thick accent, to start with, and they seemed to be foreigners, so we got a request for assistance from the eastern gate."

Kreuz was known as being much more welcoming to travelers than other towns, but it wasn't as if they unconditionally let all outsiders in. The jobs of the gatekeepers who watched the outer walls involved collecting tolls from the people who wanted to come inside, while also keeping an eye out for anyone suspicious.

And so, the gatekeeper had suspicions about these foreigners, with their trouble speaking the language. They wouldn't be regarded as suspicious just because they were foreigners. Kreuz had developed around travelers and merchants, so they welcomed foreign visitors and saw them as people to do business with. Rather, the problem in this case was their trouble speaking. The official language of Laband was known as Western Continental. It was the language spoken by the most people in the world, so people who couldn't speak it fluently naturally stood out.

As a result, an inquiry was sent to guard headquarters, and in turn Rudolph was ordered to the eastern gate.

When they saw Rudolph, their expressions shifted. One of the three looked clearly enraged, while another's expression displayed a hatred that he couldn't suppress. The last of the three stared at a single point—the small shard hanging from Rudolph's neck—and appeared lost in thought.

Because of those reactions, Rudolph realized that they were devils.

“You had told me that the devils use a different language, and it's only natural that they'd have such an uncomfortable reaction to your horn.”

“Huh?” Latina looked puzzled.

Surprised by her reaction, Rudolph in turn appeared astounded. “I mean, it's the result of having broken a horn.”

“Ah, that's true.”

The devil culture regarded their distinguishing trait, their horns, as sacred, and breaking one was considered the greatest slight against one of them. Just as had once happened to Latina, those who committed a crime were punished by having one horn broken and being exiled. And as an insult, a victor would at times

take the horn of his opponent. To a warrior, that meant living in disgrace, so many would choose to take their own lives if it happened to them.

“One of them reined in his companions, so nothing happened.”

Age differences between devils couldn't be seen by the naked eye. Devils aged slowly and had exceptionally long adulthoods. However, from the reactions of the others, Rudolph could tell that the one staring at the horn lost in thought was the mediator of the group.

“Little lady, you gave away your horn?” Sylvester, sipping away at cheap booze at the next table as always, interjected into Latina and Rudolph's conversation. He looked clearly surprised and had apparently spoken up without thinking.

“Mr. Syl?”

“If you have something like that on you, it's like picking a fight with any devils you come across, so we humans treat them as cursed items.”

“Really?”

“From what I've heard from experts on the matter, horns also get imbued with grudges and curses. When you consider how they get broken, though, that's not exactly surprising.”

Hearing Sylvester's explanation, Latina looked like she at last understood. She was fairly out of touch with the customs and thinking of devils, having left her home village when she was young and growing up in Kreuz, so even if she was talking about herself, it felt kind of like talking about a stranger.

“I'm not a human, so I can't enchant things, but...” Latina whispered, touching the shard of her own horn hanging from

Rudolph's neck.

Among the seven races, the technique called "enchantment" was exclusive to humans. Using that power, they crafted magical devices that allowed even those who couldn't cast magic to make use of mana.

"This is a part of me... so my mana still remains in it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. The 'curses' are probably because normally when a horn is broken, the mana remaining in it is full of suffering, hate, and despair..." After saying that, Latina smiled at Rudolph. "But this one should be fine. Chloe said that it was pretty, and that made me so happy that it wiped all those negative feelings away."

"I-I'm not worried about that sort of stuff." There was no way that Rudolph would be upset that there was something like a lingering essence of Latina's about it.

"What I've imbued in this are my feelings of joy at having a precious friend by my side. It's probably more like a protective amulet. Maybe the person who looked at it closely understood that."

The way that devils could see all sorts of things that humans couldn't was one of the reasons they were known to be a race with great capabilities by nature. Since they could see the lingering mana, it would have been possible for them to clearly identify the shard of Latina's horn.

Rudolph hurriedly tucked away the necklace. This precious protective charm from Latina was clearly seen differently by those around him: as a "cursed item."

"It'd probably be good to keep things low-key for a while when you go out, right? That's... I mean, I think... it'd be better if you

didn't meet up with anyone from your home village." Rudolph said that because after joining the guards, he'd learned of the devils' custom of breaking one of a criminal's horns and exiling them.

In addition to Rudolph, all the regulars of the Dancing Ocelot knew that Latina had been driven out of her home village, but they didn't see her as a criminal. Especially when it came to those who knew Latina when she was young, if such a well-behaved girl was a "criminal," then nearly everyone the world over would be a great sinner. However, there also must have been some reason behind that exile. They couldn't see anything but trouble coming from it, so the people around her all hoped that she didn't run into anyone from her home village.

"When I was little, I really only ever spent time with a limited number of people, so... I really think there are only a handful of people who would recognize me. Although a lot of people may have heard that I was exiled ..." Latina responded, smiling at Rudolph. "But thank you for worrying about me, Rudy."

"R-Right..." Having taken Latina's stunning smile head-on, Rudolph gulped down the contents of his glass as if trying to hide his blush.

At night, when Dale and Latina were alone in their room in the attic, Latina reported what Rudolph had told her to Dale.

During the night festival incident, they had temporarily separated their living quarters, but due to the slope of the Dancing Ocelot's roof, there wasn't exactly enough space for two rooms in the attic. Originally, the space was just used for storage, and there was a lot of luggage there that couldn't be moved. As a result, the space that Latina had created to get away from Dale was ultimately small and just meant to be temporary. When they returned from the capital, they were closer than before, and Latina naturally returned to Dale's side. The adventurer had regained the soothing presence that he often held in his arms.

Dressed in a light, comfortable dress as her nightgown, Latina approached the desk set up near the window for writing. She had placed a small mirror with a stand on top of it and used it as a simple dressing table. Facing the mirror, she diligently ran a wooden comb through her hair, which was her nightly ritual. She soaked the comb's rough teeth in a sweet-smelling perfume and then carefully ran it through her hair, starting at the tips. It was also part of her daily routine to tell Dale what had happened that day as she did so.

And every night, Dale carried out the maintenance and inspection of his weapons and tools while idly chatting away with Latina. Ever since Latina was little, such gentle, calm moments had only been natural for the two of them.

“That’s what Rudy told me.”

Having heard everything from Latina, Dale looked a little surprised. “More importantly... you didn’t keep your horn for yourself?”

Dale knew that in devil culture, horns were treated as sacred. That’s why he thought that even if she had broken it off herself, Latina would still treat her horn as something precious. Even if they were talking about her best friend, Dale never imagined she’d hand it over to someone else so easily.

And why did that kid, who wasn’t her best friend, have a shard of her horn? It wouldn’t be wrong for him to get into trouble with some devils and get beaten to a pulp. And why was Latina so carefree around someone with ulterior motives, like him? She really wasn’t good at sensing danger, was she?

Dale’s thought patterns had hardly changed from since when he was still a doting, idiot parent.

“Is there something wrong with that? I didn’t need it. And Chloe and Rudy said they wanted it, so that made me happy.”

“If you say so, then it’s fine, but...” There was no extra meaning behind Latina’s gaze, which was fixed straight at him. Rather, he was probably being too suspicious. While thinking that, Dale sighed. “Is there anyone looking for you in Vassilios?” That was what Dale was wondering after hearing of the devil travelers.

Dale hardly knew anything about Latina’s home village. She had been young when she was exiled, but that act of being cast out, combined with the prophecy that led to it, had left deep scars in her heart.

She apparently had too many painful memories of her home village. Persistently asking her about such things would only hurt his precious, adorable Latina, so Dale didn’t even think of doing it.

Latina wore a lonesome smile in response. “I don’t know. But... I can never go back.” Rather than resignation, there was a ring of determination to those words. “My existence can be nothing but a calamity for Vassilios. That country has finally received a new First Demon Lord, which everyone had been awaiting for so long... I’m sure it’ll become a good country, like everyone hopes...”

“Latina, you...?”

“I don’t... want to become a ‘calamity.’”

Hearing the unrest in her voice, Dale embraced her. “Was that the prophecy about you?” He wrapped her in his arms and protected her and made her feel safe, like he’d done since she was little.

Latina moved from the chair to atop Dale’s knees and rested her head on his shoulder. She had once told him that she didn’t remember the contents of that prophecy, and now she gave a slight shake of her head. “I don’t know. But since I’ve grown up... I’ve thought about it. I remembered what my parents said... and

thought that was probably it.”

She put her arms around Dale, who was hugging her, and brought herself in close to his warmth. As she did, she quietly continued on. “My parents said that they were trying to protect me... that if I stayed in that country, I’d cause a ‘calamity’... So I think that they took me away in order to keep me safe.”

“I could tell just by looking at you that you were raised with love.”

She’d been earnest and kind ever since she was young, with no darkness hidden behind it. She’d been persecuted and driven out of her home village, but she didn’t hold any grudges and had grown up honest. From the fragments of her past that she occasionally shared and the way Dale had seen her grieve over her departed father, he could also tell that she truly adored Rag.

Latina’s parents had likely raised her with deep love. Even when those around her persecuted her because of the prophecy, they remained her allies. They had worried about her until the very end. And Latina didn’t doubt the care her parents had given her as she was raised.

There was a deep, unshakeable love at her core. Otherwise, Latina would have suffered more emotional trauma than just low self-esteem from losing her parents and being driven out of her village. Those circumstances would be enough to drive any adult to despair, but she had made it through without holding a grudge against anyone or anything. She hadn’t utterly rejected everything about herself, nor had she been overtaken by hatred or sadness.

“And so, I... can’t return to that country.”

While embracing Latina, with her lonesome smile, Dale found himself hugging her tighter, once more realizing just how much she had lost.

Whenever Dale considered the things Latina had lost, he thought about what he could give her and what he should be to her. He wasn't conceited enough to think that he could replace everything she had lost. But if he could give her a place to belong and be someone to help affirm her existence, then that was enough. He wanted to be someone who could tell her that her mere presence was more precious than anything to him.

He could no longer remember a time before she was around, and he wanted her to stay by his side from now on, too.

And so, it was about time for him to resolve himself.

"I've been seriously thinking about marrying Latina."

"Took you long enough."

"Yeah, it did."

"I would have dumped you by now."

"Woof!"

It had been momentous decision on Dale's part to say that, but "the landlord family" and a single animal had unanimously given such responses. That depressed Dale so much he thought he could cry.

"Agoo." Held in Kenneth's arms, Theo's little sister Emma reached her tiny hand out towards Dale's head. She touched his black hair and messed it up, then gave a satisfied smile. Apparently she was trying to console him. He earnestly hoped that this girl would continue to grow up to be this kind. Rather than a strong-willed woman like her mother Rita, he wanted her to become kind and gentle like Latina.

"And so, I've been looking for a house lately, but..."

“I don’t mind if you leave, but Sis should keep on staying here.”

“So you’re saying the same sort of thing as your parents...”

Dale had no hesitation about casting a suspicious gaze at the five-year-old child, who boldly declared, “If you have an ‘unfortunate accident,’ I’ll marry Sis.”

“I’ve thought this for a while now, but the geezers who come to the shop really are the absolute worst influence on a little kid.”

“It really is a relief that Latina grew up right,” Kenneth added in agreement, awkwardly smiling at young Emma in his arms. There wasn’t even the slightest doubt that the drunkards who gathered in the Dancing Ocelot were the ones who had taught his son such questionable vocabulary and ways of thinking.

“I won’t die so easily.”

“Sis is a devil, so I’ve got plenty of chances, and I’m younger, so I’ll be around for a long time!”

“Seriously, what have those geezers been teaching you?” Dale didn’t object or get depressed when he saw Theo’s self-satisfied look. The child’s overly cocky statement just left Dale at a loss. His declaration had been pretty awful, but he was still just a kid. Dale also knew Theo earnestly adored Latina, so he didn’t immaturely scold him.

The ultimate culprits here were the regulars of the Dancing Ocelot, who “doted” on Theodore, the first child of the couple who ran the place. Since he was raised in a bar, though, there was no helping him constantly hearing conversations that were far from classy. Regardless of whether there was any ill will there or not, it was impossible to expect such high morals from drunks. Thanks to that environment, even a polite and gentle girl like Latina, with an appearance fitting to her nickname of “fairy

princess,” had a strong-willed side to her. And that was even more the case for a boy, like Theo.

“Still, marriage... You’re kind of skipping a lot, aren’t you? You’ve been putting things off for so long, and now you’re talking about that all of the sudden.” It was totally understandable that Rita was astounded. Latina had been transitioning from a girl into a woman, but Dale was already plenty old. In addition, there was a limit to how long they could keep things platonic and spend years together with such a lukewarm relationship.

“I, how should I put it...? I still feel like Latina’s guardian, in a way.”

“Well... You still are, yeah.”

“As her guardian, I’ve been thinking, ‘If anyone lays a hand on Latina and is just messing around, I’ll slaughter him.’”

The owners of the shop kept the quip of *You wouldn’t hold back on anyone who made a move on her, even if they weren’t fooling around* unsaid.

“And so, I’ve got the same sort of feeling when it comes to myself. I don’t want to do things halfway when it comes to Latina. She has a tendency to think of things in a pretty negative manner.”

“So marriage, huh?”

“To be blunt, I’ve been worrying lately that I’m getting closer and closer to making a move on her.”

“Latina... sure has grown, hasn’t she...?”

“She really has...”

“She was so worried about it, but... before I’d even realized it,

she'd gotten even bigger than I am now, and I'm nursing..."

The adults that had all known Latina since she was young now looked like they were staring off into the distance.

Rita looked down at her own chest and gave a slight sigh. It's not like bigger was better, so she tried not to let it bug her. Still, it was an awkward feeling to have her "little sis" be so much larger than her.

"And we've been sleeping together, but..."

Though the space in the attic was limited because of the slope of the roof, the bed in their room was actually a good bit wider than normal. Even though Latina was now full-grown, it was wide enough that it wasn't at all cramped for the two of them to sleep on it. And out in the country and the like, due to limited rooms and heaters, it wasn't at all strange for a whole family to share a bed. Personal rooms and separate beds were luxuries limited to those who could afford them, though that did differ based on place and circumstances.

Thinking of it that way, Dale and Latina sharing a bed wasn't enough to raise the suspicions of the public at large. Latina looked incredibly adorable as she snuggled in next to him, and she'd draw close to his back as if seeking warmth, perhaps unconsciously, which helped soothe Dale.

But at some point, Dale had started to feel something soft against his back when she did that. When he realized what that was, Dale awkwardly tried to keep his distance from Latina. But unfortunately, he didn't possess the special ability to completely control his unconscious actions as he slept.

"Lately I've been waking up feeling something soft and smelling something good, only to realize I'm hugging Latina."

"Are you boasting?"

“Well, that too.” As always, the man wasn’t shy when it came to such things. “It’s an undeniable fact that Latina is cute, after all.”

The people around him had also gotten better at ignoring him over the years.

“So, did you find any good places?”

“It’s been tricky... I’ve tried looking around the western district, but... Latina is definitely going to say she wants to keep coming here, right?”

“It’d also be a real mess for us if Latina wasn’t around.”

“It’s thanks to Latina that Theo hasn’t gone back to acting like a baby.”

Rita’s father and Theo’s parents, especially Kenneth, had been fawning over Emma ever since she was born. Rita tried to avoid doing it too much, but she still naturally had her hands full taking care of the baby. However, Theo hadn’t sulked at that or regressed to acting like a baby because Latina had spent more time with him in exchange.

Latina of course had an interest in the baby, too. However, she also sympathized with Theo, who was feeling lonely now that his little sister had been born. As a result, Latina doted on Theo heavily, and for the boy, who loved his “sis” even more than he loved his parents, he was perfectly alright with this development.

These circumstances that strengthened his love for Latina may have been one of the reasons he was so confident when he spoke to Dale.

“But in this district, I’d be worried about her when I’m away for work... so I’ve been worried about if I should prioritize her safety coming and going from here, or when I’m away...”

Dale had tried to plan out getting a new home for himself and Latina many times in the past. He'd ended up giving up each time, though, because he couldn't figure out how to overcome that concern. The idea of leaving her to fend for herself when he was away for a while had also been an especially big issue when she was younger.

When it came to her safety, Dale felt more at ease with the attic of the Ocelot than any high-class mansion. If he were to go with an expensive residence in the western district, Latina would have a good environment, but he'd worry about burglars and the like, and if he was going to hire servants to maintain the house, he'd have to carefully make sure that they had good character.

Considering the hours Latina worked at the Ocelot, she'd end up commuting during the early morning and late at night, when few people were around. It was only natural to worry about a woman walking on her own at such times. In the southern district, where the Ocelot was, there were plenty of travelers and ruffians of unknown background. There was also a residential area for commoners, but he couldn't quite say with confidence that the place was completely safe. Obviously, everyone there wasn't a good person.

It wasn't realistic to have Latina live in the Ocelot only when Dale was away. The space there was limited, but it wasn't as if Kenneth and Rita could just leave the room in the attic vacant, and there was no guarantee that when Latina needed to stay there, a room would conveniently happen to be open. It was difficult to secure a definite living space for the girl.

"I know that Latina can defend herself to some degree with her magic, but that still doesn't change the fact that it'd be dangerous... Latina is kind by nature, so she may end up hesitating even when dealing with scum... even though I'd be fine with her just slaughtering them."

"Most people normally wouldn't go that far."

“Slaughter them!” cried Theo.

Seeing his son declare that with a clenched fist held up in the air, Kenneth made a reasonable judgment. “You’re not exactly a good influence on kids, either.” He sighed. “It’d be easy to figure out when you were gone. You’re famous in a lot of ways, after all. Lately a lot of young folks have been idolizing you as ‘Dale Reki, whose name is renowned even in the capital.’”

Most of them were also surprised when they saw the real deal.

On the field of battle, Dale seemed worthy of his fame as a young hero. But that wasn’t the case when it came to Dale in his everyday life here in Kreuz. The sight of this doting idiot fawning over his young adopted daughter had already become a specialty of the town. For the young folks who admired him, that was enough to shatter their illusions, but the aura about him was just as rumored, causing him to give off a complex impression.

And if any of them happened to fall for Latina, they’d be subjected to the ambition of one known as a hero firsthand.

“If we’re talking about Latina being on her own while you’re away...”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise at all for degenerates to show up each and every day, right?” Rita continued Kenneth’s sentence.

“Yeah.”

“Vint could act as a watchdog, but... To be honest, that just wouldn’t be enough.”

“Woof?”

Vint wouldn’t just have to deal with people attacking Latina directly, but also would have to be on guard for peeping toms and burglars; no matter how capable of a pup he may be, it was just too heavy a load.

“I figured I at least needed something to firmly declare to the people around us that Latina and I are together, so I thought I need to make our relationship clear.”

Seeing Dale randomly search for excuses, Kenneth and his wife knew that he was hiding his embarrassment, and they exchanged awkward smiles with each other. Out of pity, they just let him be rather than using the chance to mess with him.

Not long after he had made that declaration, Dale invited Latina to Kreuz’s central park.

“Latina, do you have some free time?”

“What is it?” Latina asked, stopping and tilting her head.

“The weather’s good, so I figured it could be nice to walk to the park or something.”

“A walk? Should we invite Theo along?” Latina questioned with her usual, gentle smile, not realizing the determination in Dale’s voice.

“No... Let’s make it just the two of us for once.”

“Woof?”

“I’m saying, you stay back here.”

“Woof.”

Hearing Dale drive the point home for Vint, Latina gave an amused giggle.

After leaving the Dancing Ocelot, the two walked slowly along, hand in hand. Ever since they met, it was only natural for the two to be that close to one another. When Latina hit puberty, they had grown apart for a bit, but now they held hands once again.

At first, they had done it so Latina wouldn't get lost, but at some point, the meaning behind the action had changed. Considering how he didn't want her to leave his side though, Dale thought that perhaps there hadn't been such a change there, after all.

The path they took for their relaxed walk followed the same as the one Dale had once walked with a young Latina in his arms when they had gone to the eastern district for the first time.

"Do you remember when I took you to the eastern district for the first time?"

"I remember being really surprised. I'd never seen so many people before in my life."

"I came from the country, so it was a shock for me my first time, too."

"Um, about the shoe store you took me to... Theo and Emma's shoes came from there, too. It specializes in children's shoes."

"Huh... So do you buy yours from a different place now?"

"I use a place that Chloe told me about. Rita recommended it, too. It's a new store, but the designs are all refined, and their shoes are comfortable."

"I see."

Their conversation was just a frivolous, everyday one.

As they were talking, Latina occasionally touched her upper arm through her clothes; she seemed somehow on edge. Dale recalled unintentionally brushing up against something hard earlier, and before long voiced what he was thinking. "Ah, is that your bangle?"

"Yeah. I've kept it stored away all this time, but I thought it

was about time to put it back on, so I'm giving it a try."

That was her only belonging from her home village, and it had her father's name engraved in it. The bracelet was meant for an adult, so it had been too large for Latina when she was young. Dale had seen her store it away in her "treasure box" in their room, not wanting to lose it.

"I'm not used to it, so I just can't settle down..."

"Devil customs, huh...?"

"All the adults I saw when I was young wore them, so I figured I'd give it a try when I grew up."

"Sounds good to me. It's a charm from your father, after all."

"Right."

Because she was wearing a loose coat, it was impossible see her arms. Even so, Dale recalled the shape of the bracelet, having seen it before. It had been too big for her young, slender arm, but before he knew it she'd grown enough for it to fit snugly; the thought deeply moved him.

The central park was crowded again today, with everyone spending their time off in their own way. Seeing a group of children yelling and running about, Latina broke out in a smile, remembering how she had once done the same.

"You sure like kids, don't you, Latina?"

"Really? I guess that may be so."

Dale saw how she never grumbled about taking care of Theo or Emma at the Ocelot and how she broke out in a gentle expression like this whenever she saw children. He'd always been watching her like that.

“Someday, I’ll...”

“Hmm?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Sensing what she’d been mumbling about, Dale gripped her hand more firmly.

There were a large number of people on the wide expanse of grass, but it felt spacious enough that that didn’t seem to matter. There were trees planted here and there to create shadows to block the sunlight on days where it was hot enough to make one sweaty. Latina smiled wide as she felt a refreshing breeze blow on her cheek.

They picked out a tree to rest under and sat down on the grass in its shade. The sound of the children playing could be heard from far away, but was drowned out by the rustling of the branches and leaves overhead.

“Latina,” Dale started.

“What?” she responded, turning to face him. She looked stunningly beautiful.

Her glamorous long hair trailed down in a loose braid, and her firm, smooth skin was brilliant enough to glow without makeup. The long eyelashes over her grey eyes and her cherry blossom-colored lips had hardly changed since she was little, but now that she had matured, they were a part of what made her so beautiful. Even so, the innocent expression she wore told to the fact that there was more to her than just a pretty face.

She’s beautiful, thought Dale earnestly.

As Latina smiled at him, she looked like she was overflowing with joy. Dale felt confident that he hadn’t made the wrong

choice.

“It sure is nice out,” Latina commented.

“That’s true.”

“What is it, all of the sudden? Did something happen?”

“Am I acting that strange?”

“You are. I’ve always kept an eye on you, Dale,” Latina said with a smile, looking up at him.

Dale had known that there was no way Latina would fail to pick up on how he was acting weird today, but it still felt a little awkward and he averted his gaze.

“Latina, this is for you.”

“Huh?”

Because of his embarrassment, Dale bluntly thrust a small box straight at Latina. He practically shoved it at her, surprising her in the process.

Blinking, Latina looked at the box for a while and tilted her head. “It’s still too early for my birth month...”

“True. But today’s a special day, isn’t it?”

“Right,” Latina responded, gently bringing her hands to her chest. Dale felt relieved at Latina’s reaction, seeing that she thought of today as a special anniversary as well.

Nine years ago, Dale and Latina had met. It had been exactly nine years since the day that everything had started in that forest.

“It’s a special day for us.”

“That’s true,” Latina responded, and then opened up the unadorned box. The sudden burst of a dazzling, almost blinding shine surprised her. While it was impossible to tell from the appearance of the box, the jewelry inside was delicately crafted, and even from a single glance was clear that it was a beautiful and expensive piece.

“Th-This looks... really expensive, doesn’t it?” Latina said hesitantly in a perfect display of her practical nature.

“Why’d you have to say that?” Dale said with an awkward smile. “Never mind that. Take it out and try it on.”

“Okay...”

At Dale’s prompting, Latina took the piece out of the box. A little nervously, Dale then took it from her and smoothly put the bracelet around her wrist.

“It’s beautiful...”

“It’s also a magical device. Though to be honest, it has more meaning as an accessory.”

There was a flower in full bloom engraved in a shining jewel on the bracelet. No matter what angle you looked at it from, a beautiful flower and glamorous fruit design could be seen.

“Marry me.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s become family a different way. Not as a substitute father and an adopted daughter.”

“Dale...?”

Having moved her gaze from the bracelet to Dale’s face, Latina looked dumbfounded. Dale awkwardly looked away. Thanks to

her surprise, he was completely unable to read how Latina was feeling from her expression. He was known as a first-rate adventurer and a veteran of many battles, but he was overcome by a nervousness greater than he'd felt in any fierce combat.

"L-Latina...? I-It's pretty rough, proposing, and getting silence back, you know...?"

"But, I mean, it's so sudden..." Her voice was hoarse and shaky.

"So... do you not want to?"

"That's not it... That's not it at all! But, I've never even thought about getting married!"

"So you've said you love me, but you've never thought about getting married?"

It was very much like her, but it was still awkward.

"But, I mean, I'm a devil! I don't even know... if I can have a child."

"I know that. And I'm sure your kid would be super cute, but that's not why I'm asking you to marry me."

Dale was aware that the long-lived race of the devils had a low birth rate. He sensed that Latina was so worried about the fact that she may not be able to have a child precisely because she was so fond of children.

"Even if you're okay with it, your family may..."

"This is their answer," Dale said, touching the bracelet on Latina's wrist that he had only just now given her. In Dale's home village, there was a tradition that the presence of both flower and fruit designs held a special meaning.

“My dad and mom said, ‘Oh, finally?’ while Granny... She said, ‘If you let Latina go, you’d never find anybody else to marry you.’”

Respecting the lineage of his clan, Dale had made sure to inform his family of his intentions to marry Latina. That was also because he wanted as many people as possible to not only acknowledge his marriage to Latina, but also to give them their blessing.

He knew his family was fond of Latina to start with, so he didn’t expect them to object, but the bracelet that was delivered with their response not only employed the jewelry-crafting techniques his home village specialized in, but was also made with difficult-to-achieve, high-quality, delicate craftsmanship. Dale had been the one to request it, but he suspected it had been prepared far before he asked, as it had been so carefully crafted.

“Granny...” Latina whispered, and then looked at him with teary eyes. “Is it alright? Are you... really okay with me?”

“You’re the only one for me, Latina.”

The moment she heard Dale’s response, Latina was unable to hold back any longer, and tears started streaming from her grey eyes. “Why... do you grant all my wishes, Dale? Why... Why is it that you give me everything I want...?”

Dale went to wipe away her tears with his fingertip, but he wasn’t quick enough and new tears kept streaming down.

“I wanted... I always, always wanted... to become your one and only...”

“I know.”

“I love you, and always want to be together with you... I don’t have anything to give to you in return, but please, let me keep on staying by your side...”

“That’s not true at all, that you can’t give me anything... Just by being by my side, you’ve supported me all this time... so...” He felt embarrassed and shy, but that was far better than not saying what he needed to and regretting it. “I want you to stay by my side,” Dale said, staring straight into her eyes.

“...Yes,” Latina replied, with a smile like a flower in full bloom.

As Dale’s face approached hers, Latina awkwardly looked down. His repeated kisses were like mere child’s play, but when Latina went red to the tips of her ears, Dale’s cheeks blushed in turn.



†

All this time, Latina had been lying to herself about how she felt. She realized that because she was happy, she'd been able to turn a blind eye to it. It was a lie, though, to say that she'd given up. It wasn't true that she was able to bear it.

If she was at the peak of her joy now, then later on, she may only be able to lose that happiness she'd finally gained. What should she do if she lost him? How should she spend the time left to her?

As she whispered about such things, a clear drop fell upon the chair in front of her.

†

She was spacing out again.

Looking concerned, Dale stroked Latina's hair as she sat in a trance. She'd been going into a haze a lot lately, but ever since he proposed to her, she'd ended up in this state even more frequently.

He was assailed by a strange, uneasy feeling. His concern wasn't just based in worries about her physical condition; for some reason, there was an alarm bell going off deep inside him. And so, Dale called out her name countless times. He was trying to call her back to him.

"Latina."

"...Dale?"

"Yeah. I'm here." Latina smiled feebly back at his response; her expression reminded him of her tear-stained face after she'd gotten lost long ago.

The expensive-looking bracelet around Latina's wrist quickly drew the attention of those around her. Not wanting to damage it while working, she tried at first to store the present from Dale away. However, Dale told her not to. After all, it was the sort of piece that didn't have any meaning if she didn't always have it on. It wasn't just a mere accessory, either—it was also a magical device, so it wouldn't be damaged so easily.

“You need to make it clear that you're taken,” Dale said with a wide grin; it made Latina's cheeks turn deep red.

That was when Latina realized such an expensive piece of jewelry had a meaning attached to it. It showed everyone who saw it that Latina knew someone who would give her such an expensive present, and Latina wearing it made known that she reciprocated his feelings. And when it came to Latina, there was no need to explain who that “someone” was.

After seeing Latina's bracelet, the amount that Rudolph drank increased for a time. That didn't just go for him, but also countless young folks as well as a few men who weren't exactly in their prime.

As the regulars teased Latina (just a little lewdly), they always drank heavily. All in all, this led to a big profit increase for the Dancing Ocelot. When the regulars tried to add tips to their tabs, the always earnest Latina refused them, but they were clever enough to get her to take them by saying that they were for the couple who ran the place. Every one of the regulars was aware that ever since she was young, Latina had only had eyes for a single man. Now that her dreams had come true, they wanted to openly give her their blessings.

Latina just looked so overjoyed. Whenever they teased her, her cheeks would turn red with embarrassment and occasionally she would pout, but her every action made it clear that she was just so happy she couldn't contain it. She was already naturally pretty, but this overflowing happiness only made her look all the more

beautiful, and seeing her like that, the regulars earnestly wanted to offer their congratulations.

At least, that's how they felt when it came to Latina.

However, when it came to the man who had claimed their beloved Fairy Princess, the regulars didn't quite feel that way. Dale had been her chief guardian, but these old fogeys had watched over her far more than what would be considered normal for mere pseudo-parental affection.

"Well, drink up."

"Hold o—"

"It's fine, just drink. It's all on us, so you don't have to hold back."

"Hold on a minute... Why is it all such strong stuff...?"

"Huh? You want an explanation? Should I lay it out for you *thoroughly*?"

"No... Sorry."

In that way, Dale was crushed by the unified attack waves from the numerous middle-aged men.

Dale wasn't a weak drinker and could use detoxifying magic to sober up, but he resigned himself to his fate because he realized it was their way of congratulating him. Also, if the regulars caught him using magic, he'd be in real trouble later.

"Gah... I'm seriously... drunk..."

"Are you alright, Dale?"

Seeing Latina so lovingly concerned about Dale only accelerated the drunken frenzy.

Latina looked truly happy in the days that followed, too. Dale found the way that she pitifully grew embarrassed when he embraced her or kissed her adorable, and that made him want to mess with her even more. As if making a comeback from how he'd been holding himself back, he now doted on and clung to his younger fiancée.

Frankly, it was a bit irritating to the people around them, and considering how his doting words hadn't changed all that much, everyone felt awkward.

"Latina's just too cute, so I don't want to go to work," Dale reported to Rita for some reason while wearing a slovenly grin on his face.

She was busy with paperwork. "I'm well aware that she's cute."

Rita singlehandedly took care of the Dancing Ocelot's clerical duties, so she could frequently be seen working away in the same spot. This may have made her the perfect captive audience, but from her viewpoint, having to listen to Dale day after day was intolerable.

"She's cute! Latina's just so cute!"

"Any chance I could be spared your boasting?"

"Just giving her a little hug is enough to make her embarrassed, and if I give her a sudden kiss, she turns beet-red! I'll ask her, 'Are you mad?' and she responds back, 'I'm not,' in her super cute voice! She's just too cute, so I ask, 'Do you like me?' and she says, 'I love you,' in a quiet, awkward little voice, so I say, 'I love you so much that "love" doesn't even cover it!' back!"

"Vint! Are you around, Vint?! You've got my permission to do whatever the hell you want to this idiot!"

"As I am now, I fear nothing!" Dale said with a loud laugh.

Rita's patience almost audibly snapped.

"Ah... but I am scared of Latina hating me... She'd never say that she did, though!"

Rita had passed her breaking point. "Latina! Hurry up and do something about this love-struck moron already!" she yelled towards the kitchen. Latina timidly peeked out.

The girl replied in a feeble voice, "Wah... Rita... if I get near Dale now, then—" only to get cut off before she could finish her sentence.

"Latina!"

"Waaaah!"

She was immediately captured.

An ordinary civilian like Latina couldn't keep up with the skills of a first-rate adventurer like Dale. Suddenly, she was on Dale's lap and being hugged tight. It looked like a simple embrace, but she was so thoroughly restrained that she could hardly resist, much less move.

Turning red all the way to the tips of her ears in embarrassment, Latina looked around for someone to save her as Dale assaulted her with countless kisses.

"Dale, Dale! You're embarrassing me, stop...!"

"You're seriously cute when you're embarrassed, too..."

The idiot has no intention of restraining himself!

The light disappeared from Rita's eyes. She had finally given up. "At least keep your flirting to where other people can't see."

"R-Rita!"

“Well then, that’s what we’ll do.” Dale lifted Latina (who was on the verge of crying) up with ease and headed to their room with her in his arms.

An awkward expression crossed Rita’s face as she watched them go, and she wondered if Latina would be alright when their relationship advanced to the next level.

It’ll be hard for her to get pregnant, so that idiot might get carried away...

Quirmizi governed the harvest and the prosperity of one’s descendants, and Dale had high-ranking divine protection from that god. While devils had a low birth rate, Rita had a premonition that Dale’s enthusiasm may easily fix that in Latina’s case.

The mental image was a bit too intense, so Rita forced herself to stop thinking about it. *Latina’s gonna be sore, but well... at least she can use healing magic...*

As the older woman, all Rita could do for her “little sis” was offer a modest cheer for the girl in her heart.

Until just a moment ago, Latina had been squirming about in Dale’s arms out of embarrassment, but now she was in a trance. Still holding her tight, he buried his face in the crook of her neck. When she didn’t react, he was grasped by a terrible unease.

“Latina!”

It was only when he called her name that she faintly reacted. Her hazy, grey eyes moved slowly, looking for Dale and Dale alone.

“Dale...”

“Latina.”

He kissed her eyelids and cheeks over and over. While he did, the light returned to her eyes and she said, “Dale, Dale... that tickles!”

Her mild words of protest made him so relieved that he felt like he could cry. And as a result, he didn’t feel at all like stopping his hugs or kisses.

Even though he asked her countless times, Latina always responded that she wasn’t feeling bad. Rather, she didn’t even seem to realize that she was so frequently drifting off. She was sharp, so she should have realized something was off if there were gaps in her memory; however, she didn’t seem to notice that anything was strange. That’s what made it so frightening.

Dale felt like something was going to happen that couldn’t be undone. He was afraid of releasing her from his arms, even for a moment.

“I’m here with you...”

Latina tilted her head in confusion...

“...Right.”

...but even so, she then smiled happily and nodded.

†

He felt like he was being pushed forward, but also like he was rushing ahead.

He’d intended to take things slower and wait until Latina’s heart and body had matured, but because of his anxiousness, he sought to deepen his relationship with her further not long after they officially became engaged.

No matter what method he used, he wanted to become a little closer to her, tie her to him a little tighter. His actions were born

from that desire.

Her eyelids, her cheeks, and her lips weren't enough. He wanted to imprint every last nook and cranny of her body with kisses. He wanted to mark her as his.

His actions were rooted in not wanting to let her go and wishing to stay by her side.

†

He'd called her name countless times. Outside of her family, hardly anyone had ever said her name back in her home village, but she'd likely heard Dale say her name more than even her family had spoken it.

That beloved voice of his sounded somehow different than usual. As the heat rushed to her head, even complements aside from the typical "You're really beautiful," were hard to make out.

She was embarrassed and confused, but more than that, she was awash in a state of euphoria. The listlessness that enveloped her whole body afterward was a result of the bliss that they'd shared.

She'd long since hoped for this. She'd wanted to do this with him, not with anyone else. Her heart was overflowing with joy from the choice that she'd made. She felt so fortunate to be loved that it made her feel dizzy.

She was happy.

She brought her cheek up to that warmth that was closer than usual and lost herself in that smell that to her meant peace of mind.

She was happy, and so...

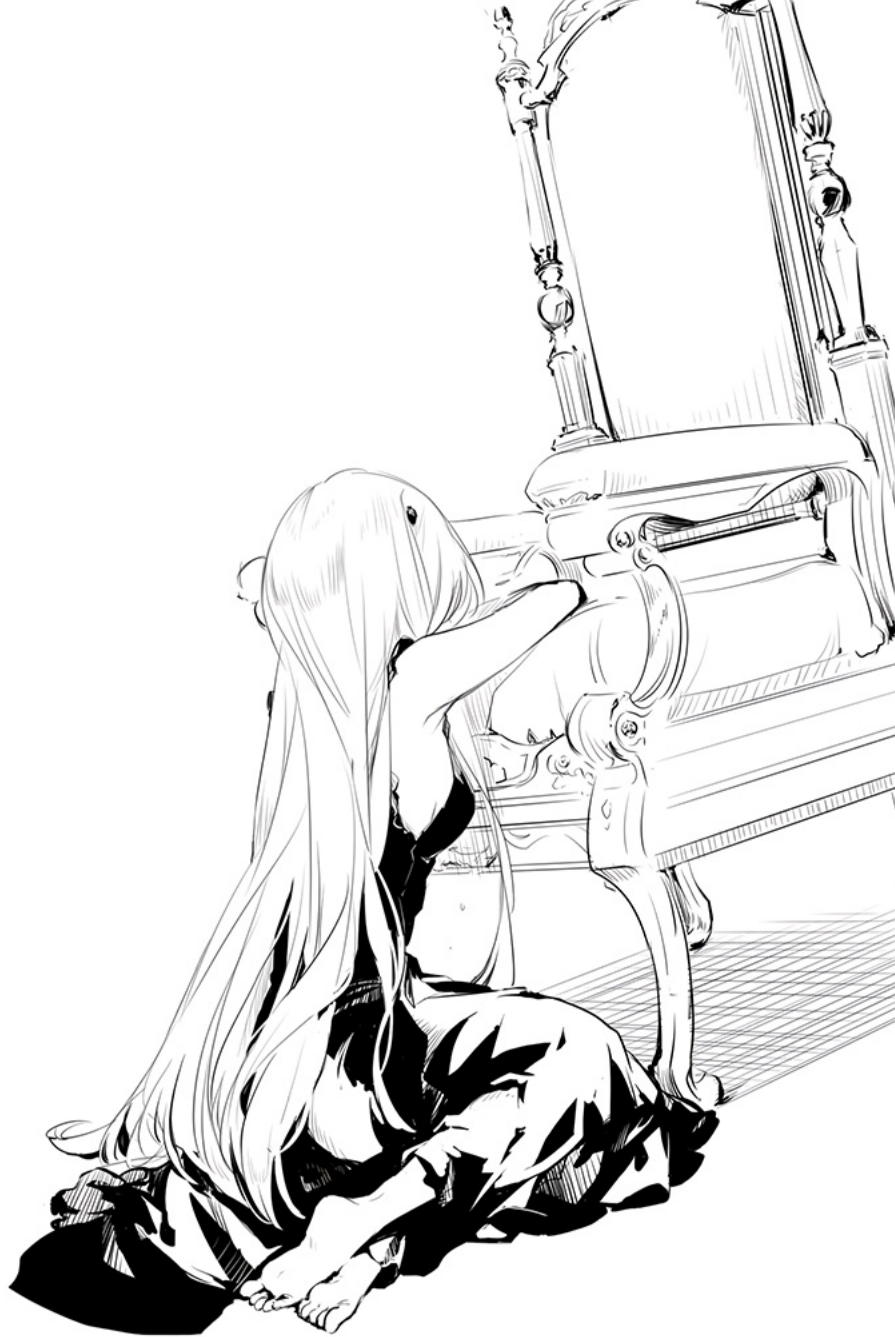
...in his arms, Latina started crying.

When she came to, she was surrounded by a familiar sight.

She sat down in front of her decided throne in the center of the circle of seven others.

Her tears kept flowing, unending. Her shoulders trembled and she continued to sob. She couldn't hold it back.

It was because she had experienced such happiness that she didn't want to lose it. She prayed that wouldn't happen. That was her one and only wish. She wanted to live together with him—the man she loved. To be with him.



It had been a lie that she'd accepted her own long lifespan. When she said she had come to grips with the fact that she'd have to part with him someday, that hadn't been true. She didn't want to lose him. She surely couldn't keep on living once he was gone, when she was all alone.

She stretched out her trembling, slender fingers. She touched the back of that throne outside of the natural order only to suddenly pull her hand back. But regardless, she knew. And because she knew, she reached her trembling fingers out toward the throne once again.

She had sworn that she'd never seek its power. And yet she still sought it because she knew it was the one and only power that could grant her wish.

[...Platina.]

That name she'd once been called had a nostalgic ring to it.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I know it's wrong... but, but I... I don't want to hurt you... but... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... oh new First Lord..."

[I permit you to use my name... my dear Platinum Princess,] the kind voice responded to the sobbing girl, as if to console her.

She turned to face the first throne. Until now, she could only feel a faint presence from it, but now she could see a clear vision of the one sitting there.

"...Chrysos... I..." she said, her grey eyes teary. The being appeared to have a golden shine, just as their name implied.

[My beloved Platinum Princess, I...] the kind voice continued, only for the girl to shake her head back and forth over and over.

"I... I..." As her tearful voice resounded through this world, a

multitude of rainbows covered the sky.

At this time when most people slept, the world was enveloped in rainbows, which silently twinkled alongside the moonlight.

†

Dale was unable to seek the reason behind the discomfort he felt towards the warm presence in his arms. If he was forced to say why, it was because of some essential factor he possessed. It was a noisy, discordant unease and disquiet. An almost instinctual part of him was rejecting the girl that he loved.

“L-Latina?”

Looking at her, Dale couldn't see anything peculiar. She hadn't changed in the least. And yet, he could sense something different.

She looked drowsy, with an even more innocent expression than normal, and her soft, white skin was enchantingly exposed. Rather than grinning wide like he had done the night before, though, Dale could only stare at the girl who had somehow changed.

“...Dale?” Her voice hadn't changed, either. And the way she tilted her head looked entirely the same as it always did.

It was because she didn't seem any different that he needed to wring out his words, saying, “...Demon lord.”

The words caused her to shoot straight up, and a look of surprise crossed her face. That reaction alone was enough to confirm that what Dale had sensed was the truth.

“Why...? Why are you... a demon lord?”

“D-Dale... how... how did you...?”

At the moment, Dale didn't have the leeway to worry about

how Latina was shaking, her teeth chattering. However, he was able to repress his instincts and hug her tight.

Those with the power of a “hero” possessed divine protection of multiple gods. One kind Dale possessed was that of Tislow’s principle god, Quirmizi, from whom he was granted a boon in regards to magic related to the earth. As he made a living by fighting, this was a hugely significant power. Dale also possessed divine protection from Azraq. It was precisely because he had this divine protection that Laband regarded him an “anti-demon-lord hero.”

Dale could detect demon lords and the demons that served them, and right now, he sensed a being that existed outside of the natural laws of man. Because he was aware of his own abilities, Dale wasn’t able to turn a blind eye to the reality of the situation. He couldn’t ignore it and pretend he hadn’t noticed.

He’d had a vague feeling that something was going on. That was why he simply hid Latina in his arms rather than taking her to the temple of Niili when he realized she was out of sorts.

He chose to just keep on calling her back, not wanting her to go wherever she was heading.

He didn’t know why.

He had no idea why she had changed.

“I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” As Latina kept sobbing and apologizing, Dale hugged her tight.

As a being that was the antithesis of a demon lord, Dale instinctually rejected them. But even so, the one in his arms right now was undoubtedly Latina, the girl he’d always, *always* watched over, ever since she was little. He had sworn to be with her and give her a place to belong. As long as she remained herself, that wouldn’t change.

Unwavering in his resolve and having made up his mind, Dale regained his composure.

So what if she was a demon lord? Even if she was, that didn't change that she was an adorable, well-behaved girl and someone utterly irreplaceable to him. Even if she'd become a demon lord, Latina was still Latina.

Now that he'd thought on all that, he remembered that thanks to the events of last night, Latina was disheveled and her skin exposed, and he was currently hugging her.

I only noticed that just now. Maybe I really am a failure as a person. "Come on, don't cry, Latina..."

"I...! I... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"I'm not mad. I may be concerned, but I'm not angry. Please don't cry..."

Dale was so weak to Latina's crying face that it didn't need to be restated.

He felt absurdly guilty as Latina kept on sobbing. It wasn't as if he were at fault, so there was no reason for him to feel that way, but he did regardless.

As if displaying that, he said what he was thinking to the girl in his arms. "It surprised me that you became a demon lord, but it's fine."

"Wha...?"

"I mean, it's already happened, so there's no helping it now."

"Huh...? Wha? Dale...?" Latina responded in shock, not having expected him to declare such a thing without even questioning her.

“As long as you’re still you, I don’t mind,” Dale said calmly. He’d already gotten over it. His expression looked crisp and refreshed.

His great love of Latina had overcome his instincts as a hero, the antithesis of a demon lord. His own identity was just too overpowering.

Before he was a hero, he was a former doting idiot who always put his adopted daughter first.

“But I... I knew that it was wrong...”

“I see.”

“I knew... that I shouldn’t seek that power...”

“Right.”

With teary eyes, Latina looked at Dale, who simply hugged her and kindly listened to what she had to say.

“Why...? Why aren’t you angry?”

“I still don’t see any reason to be mad. If it’s a decision you made after a lot of thinking, then I know you must have a reason.”

“Dale...” Hearing his kind voice, her tears started flowing again.

Clinging to Dale, Latina told him her thoughts, bit by bit. He stroked her hair as he listened to what she had to say.

“I love you, Dale.”

“I know you do.”

“I never want to be separated from you!”

“Right... I know.”

“And so... so... I sought the power of a demon lord...!”

“Hmm?” He didn’t quite understand what she meant with that statement.

Up until now, Dale had simply listened without asking any questions, but he naturally wanted an explanation. When he opened his mouth to ask, he realized he had forgotten something important.

Even if they were facing unusual circumstances, the world would keep moving as usual. Which is to say, Kenneth was curious as to why Latina still hadn’t come downstairs when she normally would have long ago, so he called up to her. “What’s going on, Latina?”

With that, the couple came back to their senses like they’d been splashed with ice-cold water.

In more ways than one, it would be bad to be seen in their current state. At the moment, that was more important than demon lords and things like that. Putting aside Dale, being seen would be especially awkward for Latina.

Rather than having any proper walls, the attic room that they lived in together was sectioned off with luggage and partitioning screens. Kenneth and Rita didn’t normally come up during Latina and Dale’s private time, but if they did now, they’d see all sorts of things. Finally remembering that she was in a rather unladylike state, Latina’s whole body turned red with embarrassment.

The instant he heard footsteps from below, Dale instinctually called out, “Sorry, Kenneth! We overslept!”

Next to him, Latina hurriedly started getting dressed. She was so flustered that her nightgown got tangled around one leg, and

she fell down with a *thump*. Now she was on the verge of tears again, although for a different reason than before. There wasn't even a hint of demon lord-ness about her.

Then again... just what exactly is a demon lord?

There were no visible changes to Latina at all. Dale could tell something was different because he had divine protection from Azraq, but nobody else would notice just from looking at her. Demon lords all shared a title but, for example, the Second Demon Lord and the Fourth Demon Lord had entirely different powers and natures. Dale had no idea what sort of demon lord Latina had become or what type of power she possessed.

And having changed, today Latina...

...peeled a mountain of potatoes, the same as she always did.

Dale tried to think about the situation calmly, but things only grew more and more confusing.

He couldn't wrap his head around the idea of a "demon lord who cries cutting an onion." They say truth is stranger than fiction, but he'd never imagined a day when he had to confront a reality like *this*.

Right, but Latina really was cute. He was trying to face reality, but he ultimately ended up avoiding it.

As Dale's thoughts chaotically darted about in that way, it showed on his expression.

According to what they'd once heard from the devil woman Glaros, demon lords weren't inherently humans' enemies, nor were they all incarnations of destruction and slaughter. And based on what he'd heard from Rose about when she encountered the Second Demon Lord, that monster wasn't an enemy of other races because she was a demon lord, but because of her own in-

herent nature. And that was why, even if Latina was a strange demon lord, Dale couldn't imagine that she was a so-called "Demon Lord of Calamity."

As he thought about such things, however, a question came to Dale's mind. He counted on his fingers and then tilted his head.

"Just which demon lord did Latina become?"

Following the logic of the world ruled over by the gods of the seven colors, the number of demon lords the world over should naturally be seven. Dale hadn't faced off with all of the demon lords personally, but thanks to his work, he was well-versed on the subject.

The other day, Latina said that a new First Demon Lord had been crowned. If that was true, then there shouldn't have been any other vacant spots.

The ruler of the largest devil settlement as well as their only nation, Vassilios, and in turn the king that led their people, was the First Demon Lord.

Then there was the one Rose encountered, the killing enthusiast, the Second Demon Lord.

In the east, coexisting with the Merfolk was the Third Demon Lord.

There was the one who governed illness, whose mere presence could ruin whole nations with plague, the Fourth Demon Lord.

Also known as the "Demon Lord of the Tower," the Fifth Demon Lord never left the tower that served as her castle.

The "Giant Demon Lord" who led demons far larger than normal devils as he wandered the earth was the Sixth Demon Lord.

And finally, there was the lover of war and strife, the Seventh

Demon Lord.

They were all accounted for.

Maybe one of the spots had opened up without humans learning of it, like what had happened with the First Demon Lord.

Still having no means of answering the question that had come to his mind, Dale stared at the girl who was undoubtedly a new demon lord.

Looking at her again, Latina sure was cute.

When Dale found himself remembering how she'd looked even cuter than usual last night, a lewd look crossed his face. She'd been a pampered child to start with, but had let him dote on her further, and she'd called his name in an adorable voice that he'd never heard before. They'd lived together for so long, but it was all things he'd never seen before. It was only natural for him to feel lovestruck.

He tried to pull himself back together, but since that sloppy grin had already crossed his face, his renewed feelings of affection thwarted that effort.

He was the same as always, too.

†

“So, I’ve been thinking about it all day...” Dale started, having waited until they were all alone in their room at night.

“Yeah?”

A demon lord and a hero were confronting each other, with no one else around. When simplified down to just that, it sounded like part of some epic saga, but the atmosphere between them felt more like some sort of strange review meeting. There was a regrettable feel to it that was very fitting to the two of them.

“You’re still you, Latina.”

“That’s right. It’s not as though my personality or thoughts have changed.”

Based just on how the scene looked, it wouldn’t be strange to think of this exchange as an interrogation, but there wasn’t that sort of tension between the two. For better or worse, they were just that close.

“So was it your choice to become a demon lord?”

“Yeah,” Latina hesitantly responded, looking like she was about to cry. “I knew that it was wrong... that if I chose to become a demon lord, there’d be no turning back... And I knew... that I’d become something other than what I’d been, so...”

“So did you think on it carefully?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s fine,” Dale said with a smile, patting her on the head. That action he’d done since she was little was imbued with the message that he was always her ally.

“Dale...”

“If that’s the path you’ve chosen, then I won’t just reject it without hearing you out, so go ahead and tell me about why you made that choice, and about demon lords.”

“Right,” Latina said with an earnest nod. She started thinking about what to say.

““Those chosen and protected by the gods become demon lords’... I heard those words when I was in Vassilios. Demon lords are those protected by the ‘fate’ granted to them by the gods. They are destined to become demon lords and continue to be demon lords, so they are protected from all things.”

“I know that,” Dale replied briefly. This was common knowledge to him as a hero—the antithesis of a demon lord.

No matter how great of a warrior or martial arts genius someone may be, their weapons and magic could never reach a demon lord. The ability to negate a demon lord’s natural protection was the crucial power of the heroes who were their opposites. Rather than the multiple forms of divine protection heroes possessed, it was this ability granted to them by the gods that placed them in the position of opposing presences, and that was where their true worth was.

“Demon lords are granted a portion of the gods’ authority, making them into lower gods born from man,” Latina said, her grey eyes quivering. “That’s why not just anyone can injure a demon lord. One with the power of man cannot defeat a demon lord... The only ones who can harm them are their fellow demon lords, also granted the power of the gods, and those to whom the gods give the ‘power to overthrow,’” Latina stated. Though she’d had trouble figuring out what to say, there was no hesitation to her words once she started talking.

“Did you hear that back in your home village, too?” Dale asked, seeing that she wasn’t just guessing, but rather was stating facts.

“No, that’s not it. Demon lords are granted the power to change the world from the Gods of the Seven Colors, who manage and maintain the world and are themselves the natural order of things. Ever since I became one, I’ve been permitted knowledge of a part of the foundation of this world.” As she said that, Latina looked at her own throne in that place which could be called a neighboring dimension, which Dale couldn’t perceive.

It wasn’t as if everything was open to her, but as long as it was within the permitted range, as she was now, she could learn all sorts of things using this terminal. She knew that this was how she was able to understand the power of a demon lord as well as

all sorts of other things.

Right now, as a demon lord she was just standing at the starting line. If she tried to learn everything at once, she'd end up drowning in the sea of information before she could understand any of it. That was precisely why she'd just be able to obtain the information that she needed bit by bit from this throne.

Latina was still an absolute novice of a demon lord who hardly knew anything of her own power.

“So can I think of that as one of the powers of a demon lord?”

“Yeah.”

As he watched Latina nod, Dale still had some reluctance, but part of him had accepted it. He hypothesized that demon lords were able to wield their power because when they became one, they gained such knowledge at the same time.

There was no way that a demon lord's predecessor taught them their powers, and it was hard to imagine one demon lord teaching another. In that case, there must have been a system in place to educate them from the start.

Such a system was truly a work of the gods.

The ones who created demon lords were the gods, who were themselves the very laws of the world; since demon lords were beings living in this world, they were unable to ignore the intervention of the gods.

“Why do demon lords exist?”

“To prevent the world from growing stagnant. The gods are the very laws of the world, so they can't interfere with it... with society, directly. Just like how the world exists, there are also administrators charged to keep things cycling, never stagnating. So from the perspective of normal people, those administrators must

all be beings who can throw the world into chaos. That's what demon lords are."

"So it's established... that some will be calamities, too?"

Dale's contract with Laband was to oppose the threat of the demon lords of calamity, and he fought to defend the nation. The job may not have broken Dale's spirit completely, but it certainly had caused him to suffer. He'd thought, *If only demon lords didn't exist...* Even if he understood that they were established by the gods, he couldn't help but resent that fact.

There was just a hint of harshness to Dale's tone, but Latina remained composed as she responded to him.

"That's why the gods also established opposing presences."

As he stared straight at Latina, Dale calmed down a bit. A conditioned reflex to not want to let her see him worked up and scare her had long since taken root in Dale.

"Demon lords are born from the devil race. They're kings born to the devils, so they become demon lords. Because they're the race that birth demon lords, they're called devils. Heroes are born from other races. They overturn the destiny that protects demon lords, and possess deep favor from the gods... The gods established their presence to eliminate demon lords from the world."

"Overturn..."

Dale had heard that word used before. It referred to the power of a hero, which let them oppose demon lords.

"But why... were you chosen to become a demon lord?" Dale asked, also wondering what she meant by it being because of him.

Latina wore a troubled expression on her face and looked down at the floor.

Before long, she opened her mouth to speak. She looked despondent, as if she'd been scolded for something. "To be honest... I didn't think that you would realize. I was planning... on talking to you about it a long time down the line, when I felt ready."

The fledgling demon lord, Latina, was apparently also unprepared for this sudden development in many ways. Dale was also quite shaken, but that didn't even compare to how shocked Latina was. She didn't know about Dale's abilities, so she hadn't even considered the possibility that he'd see through her. She had no idea how Dale had known, but she hadn't even had the chance to think about that. There was just too little time.

"I'm a demon lord, but one that exists outside of the natural order, so... I don't have any great and powerful abilities... but I do have the powers granted to demon lords in general."

She spoke the next line slowly. "Demon lords are able to create their own households."

Demons.

The followers of a demon lord. They came from all races, not just those of man, and could include any beings with intelligence, such as mythical beasts and demi-humans. Their appearances didn't change from those of their original race, but they possessed a vast amount of power that couldn't even be compared to what they once had.

"That's..." Latina hesitated once more. As if urging her onward, Dale gently stroked her hair. Feeling the warmth of that gentle hand, she looked like she was about to break out in tears as she looked up at Dale. "That's the only chance... to grant my wish."

"Your... wish?"

Latina clung tightly to Dale's clothes. He sensed her unease

from this action, which she'd often done since she was little.

“By... By becoming a demon, someone's allotted time can change... So... So, I... I knew it was wrong... and yet... I'm sorry, I'm sorry...” Latina kept apologizing as the tears started streaming from her eyes.

Dale gave a small sigh, and then hugged her tight. “So... that's why I'm the reason, huh...?”

Dale was aware that Latina had always worried about the difference in how long they would each live, as she was a devil and he was a human. However, there was nothing that could be done about that; the time would simply come when it came, so he thought they could only accept that time would flow on as it did. They had no choice but to resign themselves to it.

And yet Latina had presented an option other than giving up. She'd discovered a way to not need to accept that eternal farewell and loneliness that was sure to come as absolute. She'd had the only option possible thrust before her to achieve her long-held desire, to not lose that happiness that she'd finally gained.

The abilities of a demon far exceeded those of their original race, and their lifespans were altered as well. They were granted more time in order to serve their master.

Even if they were originally human, someone could live as long as a demon lord if they were a demon.

“Because of me...” Dale muttered, but then shook his head midway through. “You became a demon lord for my sake.”

“I... I'm sorry, Dale... I'm sorry...”

“You don't need to apologize. It's alright,” Dale said, hugging Latina tightly. Within his trembling heart, he searched for words to say. “Latina, you... want me... to be your retainer...?”

For some reason, Latina's eyes shot open wide in response.

"Latina...?" Dale looked surprised as Latina shook her head back and forth.

"I can't tell you to become something other than human... I won't say that... you should become a being outside the natural order... I couldn't reject the possibility, and I was weak, so I reached out for it, but... but I still can't make you, who I love so much... into something else..."

For some reason, her reply brought a smile to his face. He gained the resolve he needed and gave the response that he needed to: he hugged her tightly once more. He buried his face in her soft, platinum hair and was surrounded by a sweet, gentle scent.

"Dale?"

"You're still you, Latina."

She hadn't changed. She was still that same girl who was so precious to him. And so, he would still remain himself, too.

"Alright."

"Huh?"

"I don't mind becoming your retainer... a demon."

His smile was completely natural. It wasn't at all forced, and it came from the depths of his heart.

"I don't want to leave you all alone, either."

In that case, that was a choice he should make, too.

"I-I can't, Dale!"

“Why?”

“I mean... because...” Having Dale tell her so bluntly that he’d stop being human made Latina turn beet-red. Completely flustered, she tried to persuade him.

Thinking on how normally this situation would be reversed, Dale couldn’t help but grin even wider. Even after seeking that power, Latina was still carefully thinking about him. She was such a kind girl and incredibly precious to him.

“I want to live the same amount of time as you, Latina.”

And so, Dale shared her desire.

“Just like how you say that I’m the one for you... you’re precious to me, too.”

With those words, Latina was unable to stop the tears from flowing from her big grey eyes. She clung to Dale and sobbed out of gladness for his kind words, his approval, and the way he was granting her wish.

“It... It only needs to be you, Dale.” As she said that, a smile crossed the new demon lord’s tear-stained face.

There were many people who were precious to her. However, she didn’t believe that she could stay with all of them forever. She didn’t seek that. Even if demon lords possessed powers similar to those of the gods, they weren’t omnipotent. And so, she only sought him. She wished to stay with him, the most precious, beloved person to her, the one she never wanted to lose.

“I promised you, right? That I’ll stay with you until my time is up. This all falls within that promise, too.”

“I’m sorry...”

“You don’t need to apologize. After all, I chose it myself.”

“...Thank you, Dale.” Latina gently held out her hand and grasped his, which was bigger than her own. She brought it up to her cheek and closed her eyes. She knew what she needed to do. That was because even though she hardly understood anything about her abilities as a demon lord, this power alone was the one she had sought.

That hand of his had rescued her. He’d offered it to her back then and saved not only her life, but her heart and soul as well.

“My greatest happiness comes from you saving me, Dale.”

If she hadn’t met him there, or had been found by someone else, the current her wouldn’t exist. She was only able to say she was happy now because of their encounter back then. He had granted her all of her happiness.



The warmth from his palm had saved her countless times. Every time they'd walked together hand-in-hand had become a precious memory to her. And so, that was the place she chose for the symbol of their bond.

Numbered eight, or perhaps zero, this demon lord who existed outside the natural order engraved his name as a retainer, as her demon, there.

†

Dale held his left hand up in front of his eyes. He clenched it, then opened it again. After repeating the action several times, he concentrated the magic circulating through his body there. Faint, flickering letters appeared on the back of his hand, forming a word he couldn't read.

Noticing where Dale was staring, Latina explained, "The language of the devils is also spell language, and it has a high affinity related to magic, That's why the letters that are engraved need to be a devil word."

Dale was able to use magic, but he couldn't read the alphabet of the devils' mother tongue. There wasn't any formal interaction between devils and humans, so he didn't have many chances to learn about their culture.

"I wanted to use your name, but..."

"Well, it's fine. I got a precious name from you, so it's no problem," Dale said, patting her head with his right hand.

Dale was right-handed, so he generally offered his left to Latina. If something suddenly happened with the precious girl by his side, having his dominant hand occupied could prove fatal.

"It's almost shocking how much I feel like my regular self..." Dale muttered. While he sensed a power stirring within him that

hadn't been there previously, he couldn't sense anything else that had changed.

It didn't seem like that newly gained power was uncontrollable, either. Dale was an excellent magic user to start with, and he possessed a high level of divine protection, so he was proficient at controlling great powers. And even though he'd gained this massive power, he had no intention of wielding it.

"I didn't mess with your sense of self," Latina whispered in objection, pouting a little.

Having heard that, Dale asked more in detail, "Could you do that?"

"It's possible to mentally control someone so they can't disobey. The demon lords who treat their retainers like slaves all do that. I think the other demon lords all use restrictions, too..."

"Restrictions?"

"Like making it so that demons can't use the power they've gained... to kill their master."

"Ah, I see..."

No matter how much they swore loyalty, there was no guarantee that a demon wouldn't have a change of heart down the line. It seemed obvious, like putting a collar around their neck in order to avoid risks. It was necessary compensation for the great power they gained as demons.

"But I didn't do that to you, Dale."

"Huh?" Because he understood the meaning behind those restraints, Dale was taken aback by Latina's words. "Why?"

"I want you to be someone who can step in and stop me when I do something wrong." Those words were imbued with trust.

Dale buried down the question of what would happen if his heart ever changed, but being such a sharp girl, she picked up on Dale's internal conflict.

"I love you, Dale, so I'd never want to do anything to change you. If I controlled you, though, then I may end up doing that someday. I could end up wanting you to look only at me... to be mine and mine alone... but I don't want that. I love *you*, Dale, so I don't want you to become someone else. I want you to always stay yourself. Even if you come to hate me someday, as long as that's what you decided, I'll accept it."

"As if I could ever betray someone who says things like that..."

She was just too pure and adorable.

She really should wish for her own happiness more, but for whatever reason, this girl always put him before herself. She was such a naturally kind girl, so he just couldn't leave her be, and wanted her to be happy more than anyone else. As long as she remained herself and by his side, he'd surely stay himself as well.

For the time being, he hugged her tight and kissed her forehead. Just once or twice wouldn't be anywhere near enough.

"...Smaragdi." Still in Dale's arms, Latina's gaze once more returned to the letters on the back of his left hand. What she'd muttered was her birth father's name, as well as the name she'd given Dale as a demon.

Demon lords engraved names onto their retainers. That was the proof both that they were demons being granted mana by a demon lord and that they were being controlled by one. Dale had known all that, but he never imagined a day would come when he'd be given a demon name.

Latina had used her father's name because the only names she knew in the devil alphabet were his and her own. She had been

exiled from her home village as a criminal when she was so young that she hadn't yet learned all of the letters. Her father's blessing, which was engraved on the inside of her bangle, was the only letters from her home that she knew.

It wasn't as if Latina had learned everything in the entire world just because she'd become a demon lord. She had no intention of trying to do that, either. It was hard to even say if she understood the scope of her own power and abilities. But she'd achieved her main objective in becoming a demon lord, so she didn't want for anything more.

As a result, Latina the beginner demon lord left the things she didn't know as unknown.

Dale also thought it was incredibly like her, the way that she was a little aloof and easy going.

"So, are you going to call me Smaragdi, then?"

"No, I won't. But demons and people with high levels of mana will be able to read it... so there may be times you get called that."

"I see." He stopped concentrating his mana, and the letters disappeared. "Will this appear when I'm unconscious or anything?"

"Emotions and the like may have an effect on it."

"How ambiguous..."

For a bit now, all of her responses had been somehow vague. Were all demon lords like this when they started out? There wasn't even a hint of majesty to her. Perhaps demon lords inherently possessing solemnity and an intimidating air was just an assumption of humans.

While thinking such things, Dale had completely forgotten the fact that demon lords were beings like the gods, though not quite.

Latina was just too much like her old self.

“I think such things may not disappear at all, normally.”

“Really?”

“It’s the proof of a demon lord’s control... You’re being affected by your ‘master,’ me, but I’m not controlling you.”

“...I see.”

For the time being, Dale at least understood that Latina had done something out of the norm.

Well, that wasn’t anything to be surprised about at this point. Ever since she was young, she’d far exceeded his expectations and those of the adults around her. Thinking about that, maybe the fact that she’d become a demon lord wasn’t so unexpected, after all.

Over the many years he’d known Latina, Dale’s common sense had drifted in a variety of ways. His own family was abnormal in many ways to start with, so he’d become fundamentally detached from the thinking of the average man.

Still... to think that I’ve become a demon... Dale thought, considering the ability he possessed. It wasn’t as though he regretted it or thought that he’d made the wrong choice, but he had made the decision on the spur of the moment.

The greatest issue was that he hadn’t even known if someone like him, an opposing presence to demon lords, could become the retainer of one. He’d considered how there’d been a chance that he couldn’t accept a demon lord’s power, or that something could have happened to endanger his body. But Dale had held his tongue because he was aware that if Latina knew there was a potential risk to him, she’d never do it.

No matter how strong her desire may be, she would have placed her concern for his safety first. Even when she should act selfishly, this kind girl always prioritized others. And so, knowing her well, Dale decided to take that risk for the sake of her wish.

In the end, it turned out to be a needless concern.

The effect of her mana as a demon lord was even less unpleasant than Dale had expected. Even the initial instinctual rejection he'd felt towards demon lords had faded once he realized it was Latina.

She was undoubtedly a demon lord, but aside from that, she was still her same old self.

Dale couldn't quite explain it, but he felt that his instincts had come to accept her, the demon lord.

Well it's her, so there's no helping that, Dale thought. He wished to stay with her so strongly that he could persuade himself in that way.

How am I going to explain this?

He'd need to inform his family about this development, and now that his lifespan had changed, he wouldn't be able to hide it from the people around him forever. He'd have to leave it up to the head of his clan, his grandmother, to decide whether or not to let the duke know.

"Well, I guess it'll work out."

Until Dale had chosen to stay with Latina, he'd been horribly troubled and had even tried to run away. But once he made up his mind, he remained unshaken. As long as he didn't forget those feelings and that they were for the sake of the girl who supported him, he could do anything.

He didn't know what the future would bring, so he couldn't clearly declare that he'd never have a change of heart. However, he had made that choice on his own. He wouldn't blame anyone else for it.

And to be honest, he was afraid of dying and leaving her behind.

Latina was so adorable and precious to him. She'd live far beyond his natural human lifespan. Surely, a day would have come when he'd have to tell her, "You should forget about me and find someone else." If he wanted to act cool as he faced his end, that's what he would say. And if he cared about her, he'd need to accept that.

But even so, he didn't want to say that. He could never accept the thought of her happily smiling, held in someone else's arms.

It was a selfish thought, so he had no intention of ever voicing it. And so, since he held such feelings inside him, the choice she'd offered him as a demon lord also served to grant his own wish.

As Dale came to such a conclusion, he stared at Latina in his arms. Realizing he was looking at her, Latina gently smiled back at him. That smile of hers hadn't changed since she was young. It shouldn't have been any different, but at some point there was a mature allure added to it.

While thinking that he'd want to be someone who could protect that smile, Dale brought his face in close to lock his lips with hers.

†

This place was a part of the world, but also nowhere at all.

In this monochrome place composed of all colors, a circle of thrones existed. One throne was filled with a presence, and that

presence looked at the throne that stood in the center of the others, one which existed outside of the natural order.

[The Eighth Demon Lord...]

It wasn't a proper voice, but the presence's thoughts flowed through the space as a whisper.

[A being established by the gods to rein in the natural demon lords. A demon lord, and yet also not... A demon lord outside of the natural order.] That 'voice' spoke indifferently, lacking emotion, but it was clear that the words spoken were definitely not friendly.

The presence sat quietly, staring at the central throne, and before long faded away.

All that remained was silence.

The Young Man's Brother and His Thoughts on the Pair's Relationship

The land that the Tislow clan lived on was on the outskirts of Laband. It wouldn't be called a frontier area based on its position on the map, but it was surrounded by mountains, the routes there were limited, and it held little geographic importance. On the other hand, it was a place deeply blessed by the power of Quirmizi, so to those who worshipped the god, it was a special place that should never be looked down upon. The clan who protected the land also held a great deal of respect, and as a place that produced high-quality magical devices, the area was greatly important economically as well.

In the living room of the family who led the clan ruling over this land (under circumstances that were difficult to sum up briefly), Yorck responded in a dumbfounded voice to his grandmother, the current clan head, and his father, the acting clan head who handled much of the work.

“Huh?”

“I kept wondering when he was going to make a move, but it looks like he finally made up his mind.”

“Yeah.”

Ignoring Yorck, Granny Wen and his father, Randolph, kept chatting away, a letter out in front of them.

“Still, it turned out just like I said, didn't it?”

“So she finally got a response out of Dale, huh? It's because

she's just so earnest and likeable..."

"Huh...? Hold on..."

"What is it, Yorck?"

"...Why are you two so calm about this?"

Randolph stared at his younger son, who was unable to hide his shock; he looked calm and rather like he was wondering what the boy was so perplexed about. "Ever since that girl came here, didn't you at least have a vague sense things would turn out like this?" Randolph gently responded.

"No, not at all."

The letter in front of them had come from Dale in Kreuz. It had been sent in a different manner than his usual reports, emphasizing the fact that it was a personal matter, and said that he'd decided to marry Latina and wanted their blessing.

This had happened well before Dale even let the people of the Dancing Ocelot know of his intentions to wed the girl. He had finished laying the groundwork with his home village first.

Yorck's gaze shifted from his grandmother and father, who looked perfectly calm since they had expected it, to his brother's letter once again. No matter how many times he read through it, the contents didn't change.

"But when she came here... she was just a little girl, right...?"

He recalled the young girl who hurriedly darted about around his brother's legs. Her platinum hair, done up with ribbons, swayed as she went round and round like a small animal, and the expression on her face was always shifting. Yorck had thought she was an adorable kid, but he didn't think anything further of her. Age-wise, he wasn't that far off from Dale, so he never imagined his brother's feelings towards the girl could have changed so

greatly.

She wasn't a target for his affection. He couldn't say exactly why that was, but that was how he felt. But that was apparently just him; it seemed his brother's tastes leaned that way.

If Dale could see his brother's thoughts in real time, he would have felt determined to set Yorck straight.

His father and grandmother started talking about what to do next.

"In addition to his request to marry her, he also said he wants us to send a fitting piece of jewelry... It's just like you predicted, Mom."

Naturally, neither Dale nor his family had any intention of asking Latina for a dowry. However, having lived together with her, Dale was well aware that she had saved up plenty enough to act as one.

"She's too good of a girl for that idiot. Still, we better send something in time, right?"

Granny Wen had requested that the craftsmen of the village make a delicately crafted jewelry magical device shortly after Dale brought Latina with him to visit. Everyone awkwardly laughed at this, saying she was getting ahead of herself. But since there was plenty of time before when it needed to be completed and Granny Wen didn't have any requirements outside of wanting a fruit and flower design, which traditionally symbolized matrimony in Tislow, the craftsmen were able to use the opportunity to freely test new techniques and ideas. The resulting piece was a beautiful, sophisticated bracelet born of the arts of Tislow, both new and old. The very roughness added from trying out new methods actually gave it a lively feel, like that of newly sprouting leaves. It had beautiful imperfection that the more polished techniques lacked and that coexisted well alongside them. It would likely be impos-

sible to make another like it, no matter how much money one poured into such a task.

“For girls, this is a once in a lifetime event. He seems like he’d settle for something half-baked. That’s why he’s an idiot.” As always, Granny Wen was harsh when it came to her grandson.

“So neither of you are against him getting married?”

“Are you?”

“No, it’s just, it just doesn’t seem real...”

“There’s no reason to object, right?” Randolph responded to his hesitant son.

“Even if we’re talking about the fact that it’s hard for devils to have kids, you and Frida already have two. There’s no need to worry about heirs or for Dale to even think twice about that.”

Dale had yielded his seat as official heir to the head of the clan and gone out into the outside world, but on the off chance something were to happen to Yorck, there was a chance he’d be called back to take on that role. But once Yorck had had children, the chances of that became rather low.

If Dale were still the heir, Randolph and Granny Wen wouldn’t be able to unconditionally approve of his request to marry a girl who was part of another race with a low birth rate. It was because Dale had left the village that they were able to offer their blessings without any misgivings.

“And Dale never had anyone so precious to him before. If he let her go, he’d end up having a hard time finding his way in life again.”

Yorck thought back on that conversation.

“It’s been a while, Mr. Yorck,” Latina said, standing before him

with a smile.

Yorck had been on his way back from the Quirmizi temple in the capital, having been dispatched as an envoy in Granny Wen's place. Unlike Dale, Yorck wasn't used to traveling, so he was accompanied part of the way by a merchant caravan that frequented Tislow. He had separated from them, finished his business in the capital, and was waiting to meet up with them again for the journey back home. Because of his arrangements with the caravan, he didn't have time to stop by Kreuz on the way, but on the trip back, he had a good while to spend there before reuniting with them. He headed to the Dancing Ocelot in the hopes of meeting his brother Dale, who used the shop as his base of operations.

The splendor and majesty of the capital had surprised Yorck, but he found the overflowing liveliness of Kreuz overwhelming, too. It was like a whole different world compared to his calm, gentle home village deep in the mountains.

The beautiful girl who greeted him had a sparkling smile that stood out even amongst the hustle and bustle of the city.

"Yeah... Where's my brother?" He was shaken, but gave a brief greeting and asked about Dale. Rather than having her feelings hurt, Latina just kept on smiling and showed him to the customer seating.

"Dale's outside of the town for work today. If you need to see him urgently, I can call him back. Should I do that?" Latina asked. A soaring wolf cub wagged his fluffy tail at her feet. As part of his education as the next clan head, Yorck had heard about the mythical beasts that coexisted with Tislow, but he hadn't a clue as to why one of them was here.

"No... I'll be staying in town for a few days, so there's no need to rush."

“Is that so? Then have you decided on where you’ll be staying? This town has a lot of inns that aren’t too great. If you haven’t chosen one yet, we can prepare a room for you here,” Kenneth said, handing him a cup of tea.

As Kenneth spoke, Yorck looked at the girl in front of him and saw that she was clearly no longer a child; she was a young woman with just a hint of childishness still about her. Her actions were carefully polished, and her face looked both beautiful and adorable at the same time, with an air of maturity about her.

Even with her clothing in the way, it was clear that the contours of her body now drew an alluring shape, no longer that of a child.

“Ah...”

That’s when Yorck finally understood. The impression of the young girl he had met had been too strong, and he’d completely forgotten that given enough time, a girl would naturally mature into a woman. His grandmother and parents had fully grasped that completely obvious fact.

“Huh...?” Latina said with a tilt of her head, a habit that hadn’t changed since she was little. He sensed that her ability to attract people to her hadn’t changed, either.

“It’s nothing. I haven’t decided on an inn yet, so I’d appreciate it if I could stay here.”

“Right! The food here is the best in all of Kreuz, so I strongly recommend it!” Latina said with a smile, and then went to inform Rita about their new guest.

“So you only care about looks, huh, Bro?”

“That’s the first thing you say to me after so long?”

That was the first thing the two said to each other once Dale

got back. There was also the matter of the letter he'd sent back home, so Dale didn't get any angrier than that. He sat down in front of Yorck, his face just a little red.

"So... you came all this way to bring me a response?" Dale asked in a low voice, only for Yorck to quickly shake his head from side to side.

"No, I just happened to be passing through thanks to separate business."

"Huh?"

"I'm telling you, I'm just on my way back from some work acting as Granny's proxy and stopped by to see you."

"Huh, wait... Then what about my response?!"

"Dale, is something wrong? You're shouting."

"L-Latina?! I-It's nothing. Don't worry about it!"

"Hmm?" With a tilt of her head, Latina put the plate in her hands down on the table where they were sitting. "Dale, you're going to eat dinner with Mr. Yorck tonight, right? What do you want to do about liquor?"

"Huh? Oh, go ahead and bring what Yorck likes."

"Got it."

Latina had asked about that specifically because Dale normally drank weak wine. After asking Kenneth what Yorck liked, Latina brought out a bottle and two glasses.

Yorck recognized numerous dishes of the ones laid out in front of him. "Huh?" he muttered in confusion, then looked at his elder brother. When he realized what Yorck was wondering about, Dale pointed at the plate and laughed.

“Y’see, Latina apparently had Mom teach her, so she makes this stuff often.” The dishes were local cuisine of their home village, whose culture was unique from that of Laband, food included.

On his long journey, York had been eating nothing but preserved foods he wasn’t used to. When he took a bite of the meal before him, he realized he’d been utterly craving his home village’s cooking all this time.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

While taking a sip from his glass and then grabbing some food, Dale scowled back at his brother’s gaze. Yorck had no intention of prodding him too hard on the matter, though.

She’s got complete control of his heart through his stomach...

As he wondered if his brother noticed that the food was seasoned a little differently than how their mother made it, Yorck mentally sighed.

This was made to his brother’s tastes, with a little extra restraint in terms of sweetness. Even with Latina’s deep feelings for his brother also imbued in the dish, it still definitely tasted like the cooking back home.

It seemed they really were close. She had grown up to be this beautiful and they both cared for each other, so Yorck had no reason to object. Although it’s not like Yorck was opposed to their marriage in the first place. He had just felt conflicted.

“A sister-in-law, huh...?”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“Not really. It was nothing.”

If they got married, he'd have a sister-in-law ten years his junior. To be honest, as the younger brother, Yorck felt a bit conflicted about that. And so as a bit of teasing, he put off informing his brother of their response. He'd let Dale worry a bit longer.

Having decided that, Yorck took another sip of the mild red wine.

Afterword

When the serialization of the web version started, I declared, “It’s no fun always depicting a dining table set with bread and cheese, so I’ll keep the food-related matters fuzzy.”

For most of you, this is probably our first time meeting. I’m CHIROLU, and I’d like to sincerely thank you for picking up this work, the fourth volume of *If It’s for My Daughter, I’d Even Defeat a Demon Lord*.

This novel is a fantasy work set in a made-up world, but I still ended up mixing in bits and pieces of my own experiences. I spend a lot of time staring at my smartphone screen nowadays against my better judgment, but I also want to spend each day making sure I don’t overlook anything that could tug at my heart-strings.

My real-life experiences have had a great impact on my depictions of food.

I’ve spent some time baking bread. I wouldn’t say I’ve gotten very good at it, but I did at least satisfy my desire to release some stress by pounding the dough. I have an interest in things like using fruit or natural yeast, but I’m unskillful by nature. I predicted that I’d easily end up making things rot rather than ferment, so I decided to avoid taking such risks.

The area around my workplace has an especially high concentration of bakeries and the like even for being in the city, and I have a tendency to frequently wander on into them without any particular purpose in mind. As I pound away on my keyboard, I remember the undecorated goods at shops like the one that spe-

cializes in German bread. When I tasted how that simple bread, which wasn't all that appetizing on its own, took on a dramatic change in flavor when garnished with cheese, I realized that that was how it was meant to be eaten.

I, the author, may be more interested than anyone else in the taste of the bread that the titular daughter bites into in the story.

Thank you so much to everyone who helped make this book a reality. Even though she changes every volume, you always draw an adorable “daughter,” Kei. And more than anything else, to those of you who chose this book out of so many options, you have my deepest gratitude.

As long as this book brought you at least a little joy, then I'll feel truly blessed.

June 2016,

CHIROLU

Bonus Short Story: The Daughter, the Father, and the Young Man

“Hey, Latina, you called my old man ‘Papa,’ didn’t you?” Dale asked as he casually read a letter from his home village.

Dale and Latina were in their room in the attic. Combing her hair next to him, Latina nonchalantly smiled and replied, “Yeah, because he liked it better.”

Latina had stated that plainly, and an awkward expression crossed Dale’s face. He seemed to be having a hard time figuring out what to say. “Pops...”

Latina had called Dale’s father “Papa Randolph.” She referred to her true father, Smaragdi, by the nickname “Rag.” Devil culture and language differed from that of humans, but they did possess the concept of “parents,” although they had hardly any words for addressing them. Because of that, it was normal for devils to call even their parents by their given names.

When Latina stayed in Tislow, Randolph had worn a serious expression on his face and declared, “It might have actually been pretty nice, having a daughter.”

Though it was hard to tell just by looking at Randolph, when Dale’s younger brother Yorck’s wife called him “Father,” and especially when his grandchildren called him “Grandpa,” he’d apparently break out in a wide grin. Dale’s mother, who had written such things in the letter, didn’t pressure Latina to call her anything in particular, so the girl just called her “Mrs. Magda.”

“And you call the old hag ‘Granny.’”

“Right.” With that, Latina looked back and found that Dale had a bit of a puzzled expression on his face.

“But in spite of all that, you’ve never called me ‘Dad’ or ‘big brother.’”

Dale was Latina’s guardian and self-proclaimed replacement father, but ever since they’d first met, she had just called him “Dale.” She called Kenneth and Rita by their names too, so he didn’t especially mind, but thinking on it again, it seemed strange. He’d realized that their ages weren’t so far apart that it made sense to call him “Dad,” but there shouldn’t have been anything strange about referring to him as an older brother. Rather, he thought that “big brother” had a nice, fresh feel to it. And he could imagine her, back when she was little and couldn’t talk quite as well, calling him “big bro.” The thought made his heart beat even faster.

Perhaps it was only fitting, as they were father and son, but there really wasn’t any great difference between Randolph and Dale.

Latina puffed up her cheeks a bit, seemingly miffed by Dale’s words. “I mean, you’re Dale.”

“I see.”

Latina’s cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. She really was easy to understand, looking at the way she earnestly showed how she was feeling rather than hiding her emotions. That was just the way she was.

But then... Latina... she felt that way even way back when she was so little?

Realizing that, Dale’s face went red, too.

Latina hadn’t thought of Dale as a “father,” not even once. The

feelings in her heart had been displayed even in the way she'd addressed him.

When she was still a small child holding her picture book tight as she walked, Dale didn't think of her as anything but an adopted child, but the young girl had a strong will of her own. She'd been plenty grown enough to have her first crush.

Man... guess it's no surprise I got called dense...

With an awkward smile on his face, Dale stared at the girl whose love had grown since she was little and whom he could no longer call "young."

The gentle light of the lamp was cast upon the two of them as they spent their time together.